

A MONSTER WHO LEVELS UP

Jee Gab Song

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A Monster Who Levels Up (레벨업하는 몬스터)

by Jee Gab Song (지갑송)

Synopsis

This is a story of a man named Kim Sae-Jin, who one day, inexplicably wakes up as a Monster. Follow him and his perilous journey to get his life back as a Human, all the while growing even more versatile as a Monster in the process. This should be... complicated, somewhat.

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Chapter o: Prologue

He became an orphan very early in his life due to a calamitous tragedy.

Barely at the tender age of 7, when it would only be normal to look for his mom's guidance whenever something vexed him, he had to go to an orphanage because none of his relatives wanted to take him in.

The orphanage's director wasn't a human trash that treated children like dirt but at the same time, wasn't a sparkling example of how to be a nice person, either.

Wanting to leave such an orphanage as soon as possible, he found a job and started working right after graduating from the Elementary School. While resembling a very thin stick, thanks to his tall-for-his-age height, convincingly lying about how old he actually was proved to be rather easy. Of course, on that one occasion his lies were exposed, he got chased away from the workplace without receiving a paycheque, but well, that was to be expected.

Regardless, he continued to work tirelessly during the night and slept in the Middle School during the daytime; and this was how he lived his early life.

Around this time, he stopped utilising the bed in the orphanage as well. Honestly, he found it more comfortable to sleep in the school's infirmary, or among the wary gazes of the homeless occupying the subway station.

He couldn't be sure, but maybe the reason for his height remaining the same from 6th grade in Elementary School probably had something to do with this unhealthy lifestyle.

Whatever the case may have been, through all the rough and tumble, he succeeded in becoming completely independent upon turning 18.

4 years of back-breaking labour after that netted a total of \$8750 which sort of enabled him to rent out a single room for himself.

Other people might have found this space a seriously tight fit, but for him, it was the safest and most comfortable place to put his feet up and take it easy.

And within this comfortable environment, his own home, he allowed himself to have a dream of a better future.

If it was under any other "normal" circumstances, he would've surely achieved that idyllic life he had dreamt of in the near future.

[Innate Trait Progression: 100% Complete]

System has activated

– Change in species due to host's Innate Trait Progression: Human → Monster

[Name: Kim Sae-Jin]

[Age: Roughly 22 Years Old]

[Height: 172 cm/ Weight: 65kg]

► Status

[Physical Strength 13]

[Endurance 12]

[Agility 16]

[Energy Manipulation 6] (Raw said "Ki Strength", which didn't make much sense to me, so I changed it….)

[Mana Affinity 1]

[Magic Strength 1]

[Luck 3]

► Trait: 「Monster」

[Rank: Rare]

[Trait Level: 1]

- Species changed from Human to Monster. Once per 24 hours, the host can maintain the Human Form for (60 Minutes) that is calculated from the numerical value of [Energy Manipulation] stat.
- Stats of the Monster Forms will be reduced during the Human Form.
 - Currently maintaining the Brown Wolf* Form.

Currently available Monster Forms*: Orc, Wolf, Goblin.

[*Forms: living as a chosen Monster. When certain conditions are satisfied, Monster's rank will rise. Example: Orc – Orc Warrior – Great Orc Chieftain]

[*Brown Wolf: Strength and Defense increase by 3, Agility increases by 6. When in Human Form, the effects will be reduced by $\frac{1}{3}$.]

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....That was until this f*cking Trait ambushed him out of nowhere.

< oo. Prologue > Fin.

Chapter 1: Becoming a Wolf (1)

For the first week after unlocking his Trait, Kim Sae-Jin lived in isolation like a mental patient.

It was totally understandable as, for 23 out of 24 hours in a day, he suddenly had to exist as a Monster.

The bosses at his part time jobs sent him various messages and phone calls, but they all entered in one ear and left through the other without really registering in his brain.

Two of them showed concern, but the other one threw verbal abuse like there's no tomorrow. But then again, it was understandable where they were coming from.

The only thing Sae-Jin couldn't get a grip on, was the absurdity of his current situation.

And after another week passed by, the small, meticulously-kept room which he took great pride in, became a messy cesspool of untidiness.

It was par for the course, really. The effing claws on his paws would leave behind unsightly scars all over the place no matter how softly and gently he walked around.

Like this, where a living couldn't really be called a living anymore, another 4 days went by.

Only then, did Sae-Jin finally come to accept his predicament.

A body length of around 2m, a shoulder height of around 1.2m, a tail length of around 50cm, a body weight definitely exceeding 90kg. And a coat of brown fur.

At a glance, they might sound like the specs of a still-growing tiger, but unfortunately, those numbers belonged to him.

Sae-Jin was actually a Brown Wolf now.

A Monster that was considered as the weakest prey there was,

always targeted by those conceited idiots who proudly label themselves as the "Knights", "Mercenaries" or "Hunters."

Also, too ambiguous to be called a true, bona fide Monster – striding the imperceptible boundary between a beast and that of a full-fledged Monster, it was not easy to categorise this creature.

On top of being the newbies' preferred choice of hunting material, a wolf was usually massacred on sight without mercy because of the following traits:

- 1, There were plentiful of them like a mob,
- 2, They were slightly troublesome for regular citizens to deal with.

That was Sae-Jin's form, currently.

He found it difficult to accept this initially for obvious reasons. And after finally coming to terms with it, he then realised that wasn't the end of his troubles, no. Now, he had to madly formulate plans to "safely live." His desires to continue breathing was a lot stronger than he expected. At least there was the cushion of \$3500 in his bank account, which he was definitely thankful for.

Sae-Jin quickly decided to maximise his Human Form during the precious 1 hour window.

For his food, Sae-Jin bought easy-to-prepare TV dinners from a convenience store 5 minutes away and always ate them while in his Human Form. His pride as a human being wouldn't have it any other way. And he made sure to leave himself a 30-minute breathing space in case of an unforeseen emergency.

Then he practiced controlling the strength of the Brown Wolf Form in order to perfectly mimic the creature. After 4 days of concerted effort, he even figured out how to retract his sharp claws.

Meanwhile, whenever there was a chance, he changed into a Goblin Form and began cleaning the mess in his home. A 140cm-

tall Goblin might have a small stature but it possessed a surprisingly supple pair of hands for a kind of jobs that demanded precise craftsmanship, which was perfect for taking care of the household chores.

Those ugly claw marks remained here and there, but before long, Sae-Jin's room regained its former spotless, clean appearance.

But the biggest issue still had to be solved: living expenses.

Without paying the monthly rent, he was surely living on a borrowed time here.

That's why he used the bracelet computer, something that was discarded into a corner of the room a while ago.

Sae-Jin was going to search for how to 「Start Earning From Home,」

...But then, stopped. As a high school dropout, with only a middle school graduation certificate, he just knew it would be impossible to find someone willing to let him work from home.

He gazed at the hologram display projected in the air with a tinge of regret, slowly stroking it. Then a thought suddenly came to him, and Sae-Jin searched for topics regarding the Monsters.

That's how he accidentally found a hint that could potentially save his life.

Seeing the topic of the discussion, a powerful glare of bright light burned dangerously in both of his eyes.

Q: 「Does the Lycanthrope, the top-dog in the Wolf-type Monster pecking order, really exist?」

A: 「According to the 1st Generation "Soo-ins" (TL: literally humanoid beastman in Korean) who crossed over the World's Rift, they did exist in the legends. Able to seamlessly change their shapes unrestricted from a fearsome bipedal wolf to a perfect appearance of a tailless human, one could say that they share some

similar racial traits with Soo-ins. In truth, though, the class of incredible power they wielded was on another scale altogether, apparently, and couldn't even be compared at all. But owing to their unique trait of violent nature, they ended up going extinct and have become the creatures of legends instead.

The Lycanthrope. It was a mythical Monster Sae-Jin had heard about at least once from somewhere.

An unfathomable existence, that could freely become a flawless human despite being a Monster and vice versa. It was different from the Soo-ins who could alternate between an animal and a humanoid form. More than anything, the human form assumed by a Lycanthrope didn't leave behind a tail.

"What if...."

Definitely, the effing Trait told him that "when certain conditions are satisfied, the ranks of Monsters will rise."

He intuitively understood then. The only way for him to exist was to exploit this rule.

Didn't matter what the conditions were, he had to quickly complete them in order to evolve over and over again.

There was a chance that his evolution could go down the wrong path but this was the only avenue left for him in the end.

He promptly stood up. The things he had to do were already set in stone.

*

The mountainous regions of Gangwon Province had been designated as the Monster's Territory for a very long time.

Low tier Monsters such as Wolves, Orcs and Goblins, mid tier Monsters such as Trolls and Gargoyles, and finally, high tier Monsters like Ogres and Wyverns, occupied this Territory and called it as their home. One of the world's most diverse Monster ecosystems existed within the borders of Gangwon Province in the Republic of Korea. Naturally, Monster-hunting Knights and Hunters flocked here, aiming for this perfect place to earn money in the "Home of Monsters."

"Hey!! Stay with me!!"

However, it was only possible for the Knights possessing at least the ranks of mid to high tier to delude themselves into mistaking this place as nothing more than an easy gold mine.

Most people saw the mountains as Hell on Earth, where ferocious Monsters engaged in brutal conflict against each other, and to those who bet their lives in order to earn a living by catching these rampaging creatures, all of them wished to abandon this horrible killing field and never to return here as soon as they got their exit passports.

"You are almost there, don't you faint on me, now!! Stand up!!"

One could receive the much-needed aid from the military at the borders of Gangwon Province.

A low tier Hunter named Kim Tae-Jo couldn't spare a thought to wipe the streaming blood off his forehead. He was too busy slapping the cheeks of his comrade, who was lying sprawled on the ground, unmoving.

".....I... can't... go on."

Tae-Jo's comrade could only mutter out dispiriting words. This man's eyes were deeply closed, the flames of life ready to extinguish, one of his legs missing.

It was a gruesome sight if one took a closer look. Even a quick glance could tell these two Hunters had went through a terrible ordeal at the hands of a vicious beast judging from the deep teeth marks on the wound.

In the beginning, their party consisted of 3 low tier and 2 mid tier

Hunters but they ran into a Monsterised Great Tiger.

Their luck was really bad.

Monsterised Great Tigers lived in the deeper parts of the mountains, existing to compete against more powerful Monsters up there. In other words, they never bothered to come down to the lower grounds near the borders at all.

But the party did meet a Great Tiger, which was akin to getting struck by a stray lightning in broad daylight while out on a stroll. It was simply unheard of.

"Hey!! Stand u..."

Kim Tae-Jo couldn't finish what he wanted to say.

Because, from somewhere nearby, he could hear the guttural "Krrrr" growling of a beast.

""

Holding his breath, Tae-Jo slightly tilted his head towards the direction of the sound, and found a lone wolf, its fur shining brown and clearly starving from a prolonged hunger.

It was just a pile of skin and bones, its eyes bloodshot, attesting to how famished it was.

".....Sh*t...."

A Brown Wolf was the weakest Monster out there. Normally, 3 low tier Hunters could take it down – no, if it was weakened by as much as this creature, then only 2 should be enough to hunt it down.

But the current situation was the worst. His comrade was missing a leg, and by dragging the grievously wounded man all the way here by himself, Tae-Jo was near his own physical limit as well.

"...Go away!! Away, I say!!"

Tae-Jo desperately shouted. But overcome by avarice, the lone

Brown Wolf continued to drool nonstop and slowly advanced towards him. It looked as if the Wolf was cautiously assessing the situation of the meal that took too long time in coming.

"Oh, god d**n it!!"

There was no other choice. Tae-Jo had to abandon his comrade and make a run for it. However....

- Krrrrrng!!

The exhaustion from pushing himself to the limit and the Brown Wolf's fear-inducing growl conspired to freeze his legs; they wouldn't budge.

And also, no matter how starved, Tae-Jo realised that the famished Wolf was still faster than him, and it wouldn't let one of the free meals run away just like that.

"This... this son of a bi*ch. I caught hundreds of bastards like you until now..."

Tae-Jo swore in resignation, knowing well that his number was up. He grabbed the shotgun that no longer had any Mana bullets in it. If the lady luck smiled on him, then he could land a hit in the head of the Wolf and knock it out. That was his hope.

""

Tae-Jo swallowed his spit loudly.

That, became "the" signal.

The Brown Wolf disregarded everything and kick the ground, crazily dashing in towards him.

Scared, he could no longer dare to watch and squeezed his eyes shut, and swung the stock of the hunting rifle hard.

Kwajeeck!!

The noise he heard was slightly different to what he was expecting, a dull sound from a blunt impact. Rather, it was similar

to a neck snapping.

"...??"

Tae-Jo carefully opened his eyes after hearing that strange sound.

Stronger bout of despair slammed into him as soon as he did that.

"Huh....?"

There was another Brown Wolf in front of him.

But this one was a giant – a tiger. Its huge body was like that of a tiger just before going through a Monsterisation.

This massive Brown Wolf had its fangs deeply buried in the neck of the unlucky Wolf aiming for Tae-Jo's and his comrade's lives.

The size differences between these two wolves made calling them the same type of Monster a laughable notion. Of course, the famished Wolf was atypically smaller than normal, but still, Tae-Jo had never ever seen nor heard of a Brown Wolf this massive before.

"God d**n it."

Tae-Jo couldn't help but to mutter out swearing again, being on the receiving end of such a huge Brown Wolf's gazes.

The incredibly sharp eyes of the Wolf burned in the flames of pure, unadulterated and much deserved confidence. Being stared at by such powerful, and somehow, courageous eyes, Tae-Jo felt indescribable pressure weighing down on him.

He had to accept the reality of his situation.

So, this is it. Looks like this is where I meet my maker.

Meeting a Monsterised Great Tiger, then this Tiger-sized Brown Wolf.

My luck's finally become pretty d**n good isn't it. Yep, it's so effing good today, it has turned into my last bloody day on earth!!

"....Fuu."

Completely resigned to his fate, Tae-Jo could only sigh and close his eyes again.

Heavy rustling of paw steps teased his eardrums like a distant hammer being struck.

However.... no matter how long he waited, the expected agony of death didn't materialise.

Confused, Tae-Jo ever so carefully reopened his eyes.

"Eek!!"

Right in front of his nose, stood the Brown Wolf.

But it was the strangest thing, ever.

The wolf was inserting its sharp fangs between the gaps of his fallen comrade's armour and was in the process of lifting him up.

"What... what the hell?"

Tae-Jo briefly entertained the idea of this Wolf playing around with its food but had to kick that thought to the curbside on the double by the next gob-smacking actions of the creature.

The Brown Wolf gestured with its sizable head as if it wanted Tae-Jo to follow it, and begun carrying the wounded comrade in its mouth towards the direction of the military base to the West.

< 01. Becoming a Wolf (1) > Fin.

Chapter 2: Becoming a Wolf (2)

'He's following well,' thought Kim Sae-Jin as he took a glance at the overly cautious male Hunter behind him.

It was a bit of a waste to leave behind the carcass of that dead Brown Wolf, but Sae-Jin figured that little guy wouldn't be worth much as a material seeing how weak and famished it was. At most, the Korean government's reimbursement would be worth less than \$440 US. He would have to derive satisfaction from knowing that he was able to help these two Hunters today instead.

After walking for an unknown amount of time, the exit from the mountainous regions' border could be seen in the distance. A signboard near it said, "From here on, the number of Monster encounters will increase."

Confirming their location, Sae-Jin lowered the unconscious Hunter, who had a faint pulse, to the ground and glanced back.

"Heup!!"

The Hunter following Sae-Jin made a funny noise as he hurriedly held his breath in fear. Feeling rather mischievous after seeing that nervous appearance, Sae-Jin decided to pull a prank at the scared man.

- Krrrrng.

"Eeeeeeek!!"

Sae-Jin found the panicky reaction of the Hunter falling on his b**t absolutely priceless.

'Have a less dangerous life, Mister.'

The funny reaction caused Sae-Jin's lips to twist upwards. He then lightly patted the shoulder of the sacred and sweaty Hunter with his front paw, and stepping past, he leisurely headed back towards the forest. Left alone, Kim Tae-Jo remained there utterly dazed for a long time. The massive Brown Wolf had long disappeared into the thicket, but he failed to understand what had just happened.... this maddeningly weird experience.

Somehow recovering from the shock, he recounted the events from several moments ago. That big Brown Wolf.... That Monster.... It rescued him.

Unsure of whether he was dreaming or not, Tae-Jo sharply slapped his face.

"Ouch."

It hurt. Therefore, it was definitely not a dream. Still dazed, Tae-Jo's stares fixed on the direction where the mystery Brown Wolf had gone off to.

"...Cough, cough."

"Ah, Sang-Yun!! Can you hear me?!"

The wounded comrade, Sang-Yun, coughed weakly, breaking Tae-Jo's dazed state. He quickly shouldered the fellow Hunter and stood up.

"Heeeey, over here!!"

Tae-Jo shouted out aloud and soon, he could see some sort of stirring by the guard post building over yonder by the exit.

"Please help!!"

After determining the location of the desperate voice, soldiers hurriedly ran towards his direction. A relieved smile broke out on Tae-Jo's face as he realised that he'd be able to live for another day, all the while momentarily forgetting about the dream-like event of a Wolf saving him.

*

"That's right. That's the only fitting explanation for what happened. That massive size, that display of human-like intelligence...."

Once more, Tae-Jo's expression became profoundly moved after recalling the event as he sipped some warm tea.

"But, can a Monster evolve into a Spirit Beast?"

A soldier manning the border exit guard post tilted his head in puzzlement and asked, unconvinced.

Spirit Beasts were creatures seemingly blessed by Divine Spirits. They were unfathomably mysterious beings; their physical abilities and mental prowess were greatly enhanced as they accepted the aura of Mother Nature. They were essentially different from the vicious beasts with Mana that ran amok, and so, were treated differently as well.

"If it's a Wolf, then there's a good possibility. Right now, Wolves are treated like Monsters because of their vicious nature but, originally, they were wild animals to begin with."

"...If that's true, then, wow...that's some mystery."

The soldier couldn't fully believe Tae-Jo's words. That was because, a Spirit Beast wasn't some common existence. For instance, the legendary creature, Nine Tailed Fox, was included in the category of Spirit Beasts.

Facing the sceptical attitude of the soldier, Tae-Jo creased his forehead while opening his mouth.

"There is no ifs. It's the honest truth. I really did encounter... Ah, that's right!!"

Suddenly remembering something really important, Tae-Jo shouted out and shot up from his seats.

"The Recording Lens!! I was wearing the Recording Lens at the time!!"

A Recording Lens did what its name implied – it recorded images reflected on the retina. Dirt-poor hunters like Tae-Jo, who could only survive day to day by earning his keep the hard way, wore this lens every now and then when going out on a Monster hunt. It was for that off chance of seeing a rare Monster that could be worth something. That, or if there happened to be a particularly detailed recording of a hunt, he could sell it off to make extra cash on the side, calling it "educational material."

"...Eh?"

"Just wait a dang moment!! I'll definitely show you!!"

The soldier worried about seeing blood pour out for a moment as Tae-Jo hurriedly began digging into his eyeball, fishing out a single lens.

"Here, here, take a good look!!"

"Achoo!!"

Around the same time, in a nearby cavern Kim Sae-Jin in his Goblin Form suddenly sneezed out during the middle of dismantling a Monster corpse.

"...*sniff*"

He wiped his itchy nose with the bloodied hand and finished organising the extracted Monster materials before putting them away, then took a seat on a stone chair.

"Keuheng."

One of the Goblin's traits was "unable to stay still." It was practically impossible to remain still in the Goblin Form as a result. Blowing his nose, rubbing his hands for no reason, making weird noises – they were instinctual habits and Sae-Jin ended up doing them involuntarily.

Sae-Jin deeply hated this side of the Goblin Form so he promptly

changed back into the Brown Wolf Form. Lying snugly on the flat stone bed, he willed the Status Window to appear before him.

► Trait 「Monster」

「Rank: Rare」

「Trait Level: 3」

- Species changed from Human to Monster. Once per 24 hours the host can maintain the Human Form for 70 Minutes, calculated from the numerical value of [Energy Manipulation] stat.
- Stats of the Monster Forms will be reduced during the Human Form.
 - Desire to sleep has been lost.
 - Currently maintaining the Brown Wolf* Form.

► Status

[Physical Strength 16]

[Endurance 15]

[Agility 19]

[Energy Manipulation 7]

[Mana Affinity 1]

[Magic Strength 1]

[Luck 3]

[*Brown Wolf: Strength and Defense increase by 5, Agility increases by 8. During the Human Form, the effects will be reduced by $\frac{1}{3}$.]

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The results of a month's effort was his Trait level increasing by a whopping 2.

-Krrrrng.

Sae-Jin growled. He was dissatisfied and angry at the slow rate of his progress.

It was almost a month ago when he resolved to become a Lycanthrope. He packed all his meager belongings together and set off to the Gangwon Province. It was like doing a Time Attack in a video game – his previous home in the suburbs of Songpagu was 30 minutes away from the mountains of Gangwon, a feat impossible if it weren't for the advent of the Mana Trains. (Songpagu is a suburb in the capital Seoul and its defo much further than 30 minutes from Gangwon.)

Cutting it fairly close, Sae-Jin cautiously evaded the eyes of the military and the Knights Orders, and successfully sneaked past the borders of the mountain region undetected.

At first, he had no idea what he should do. Suddenly barging into the land of Monsters, Sae-Jin had to repeatedly suffer through confusion and chaos. And when Monsters challenged him, he fought them off by turning into either the Orc Form or the Wolf Form and survived.

It was a painful experience. The smell of raw flesh stuck between his teeth nauseated him, the unpleasant sensation of pummeling the life out of his victims with a blunt weapon – all these experiences were something he just couldn't really get used to. He even cried himself to sleep every night thanks to the anxiety of steadily losing his humanity gnawing at him.

But the feeling of disgust lessened as time passed, and even though he couldn't readily accept them, just like that, Sae-Jin was progressing step by step towards achieving his goal.

The first thing he did after entering the mountains was to find and secure a nice cave that couldn't be located by the Hunters. He turned it into his base of operations. Then naturally, he started living there for good.

Utilising the Goblin Form's surprisingly deft hands, he

remodeled the interior of the cave, and to withstand the cold weather, he lined up the fur of several Monsters around the place.

There was a stream nearby so that was drinking water taken care of; he also roasted the meat of wild animals he caught for sustenance.

After that, all he did was a nonstop hunting.

When he was at a level 1, pretty much every single Monster he fought posed a serious threat to his life. That was even including the other, common-variety Brown Wolves.

So he used his head a little. Sae-Jin only picked on those poor wolves that were rejected from its own pack or were too dull-witted, and by relying the Orc Form's much greater physical strength over that of his victims, he smashed their skulls in. After smashing 10 heads, his Trait had its very first "level-up."

But the changes he went through were slightly different than expectation. Sure, both the bodies of the Orc Form and the Brown Wolf Form became a lot bigger and his stats became just that stronger, but weirdly, the Goblin Form stayed the same.

However, what he wanted wasn't this type of "growth." What he came here for was to "evolve."

Such as to become the higher ranked Monster in the Wolf species after the Brown Wolf, the Grey Wolf. For the Orc Form, it was the Orc Warrior. For the Goblin Form.... uh, whatever was higher up.

Instead of the evolving, his Forms remained the same and only the "stats" improved.

Sae-Jin didn't lose heart though, and just poured in more effort. He thought that maybe he just needed to level up once more.

It was disappointing but at least the hunting became easier with his Trait Level being 2 now.

Even if he fought against other Brown Wolves, he was over 1.5

times larger, and it was evident that the disparity in strength was greater still. In other words, he became the top predator in this neighbourhood almost in an instant.

But leveling up became increasingly difficult. From Level 1 to Level 2, he only had to spend 3 days and kill 10 preys. However, for Level 3, even nearly 30 days and 100 kills proved to be insufficient.

Frustrated, Sae-Jin thought about heading to a hunting ground with higher tier Monsters only to give up on that idea.

That was because, in the world of Monsters, the difference in power between two tiers was like heaven and earth. It was actually that enormous.

The easiest example was to compare a Brown Wolf to a Grey Wolf.

The Brown Wolves were ranked lowest tier, and the Grey Wolves were also ranked as a low tier, just one place above them. That was it.

But if Brown Wolves wanted to hunt down one Grey Wolf, then at least a single pack consisting of over 12 individuals were needed.

That's why, without any other choice he had to repeatedly grind away like crazy in this lowest-level hunting ground for the past 31 days. Finally, he was able to level up one more time.

But perhaps inevitably, what awaited for him was the growth of his stats and not the evolution of his Forms. His size and overall power might have grown to a point where he could rival a Grey Wolf, a creature that could easily contend with a full-size tiger, but in the end, he still couldn't become a one.

'Just what is it that I need to do?'

An unexpectedly cute sound escaped his nostrils as he sighed in his Wolf Form. None of the hapless Hunters would've thought he was cute though as they would be too busy running away like scalded cats after encountering his massive Brown Wolf Form. As he was sinking deeper into his worries, suddenly, strange texts popped out in front of his eyes.

^rCondition Complete: Minimum Reputation._J

- The minimum of 100 people have engraved the existence of "the Brown Wolf" into their minds. All stats rise by 1.
- The Grey Wolf Form is available for host instead of the Brown Wolf. All stats related to the Wolf Form will be adjusted accordingly.
- "The Grey Wolf's Sense of Smell" will be available during Human Form. (Active Skill)

► Status

[Physical Strength 22]

[Endurance 21]

[Agility 28]

[Energy Manipulation 8]

[Mana Affinity 2]

[Magic Strength 2]

[Luck 4]

[*Grey Wolf: Strength and Defense increase by 10, Agility increases by 16. During the Human Form, the effects will be reduced by 1/3.]

"....Fuuheng??"

This inexplicable change was so out of nowhere, Sae-Jin was momentarily at a loss for words.

But after recovering quickly, using the pair of inquisitive, excessively round eyes he ascertained the condition of his new body.

Definitely, he had changed.

His previously doggy-brown fur had completely morphed into a new shiny, grey coat.

< 01. Becoming a Wolf (2) > Fin.

Chapter 3: Becoming a Wolf (3)

A Monster's remains could be either useful or useless for several purposes.

If a monster's bones were sturdy and its skin tough, then they could be recycled as base materials for making weapons to fight against other Monsters, and if the Mana accumulated into the heart and became a Mana Stone, then that Monster's carcass would be used up as the basis for creating magic and miracles. Miracles, because scientifically-unexplainable magical effects could be given to people and items they wield by the so-called "enchanting" effect.

The one tasked with the disposal of the Monster remains was the Government. This arrangement came about because those in power wanted to correctly gauge the situation within the Monster territory and to provide the adequate response if needed; and also to prevent the greedy and money-craving private entities from potentially defrauding the Knights or the Hunters.

But the "The Monster Remains Disposal Through Public Enterprises Act" couldn't be found anywhere else except only in South Korea. That was why this country was called a Heaven for people making a living off Monster remains and consequently, there was a higher ratio of Knights, Mercenaries and Hunters among the Korean population.

"Two Brown Wolves. Here's the government reimbursement of \$880 as well as your new Low Tier Hunter licence. Congratulations on your promotion of rank, sir."

Currently, Sae-Jin was inside the government-run "Monster Store" where the remains were disposed off. This was the place where the remains could be sold, the various equipment bought and at the same time, get the administrative works done.

And that was to determine the ranking of the Hunters. This was

directly tied to his or her current results, while the said results could be calculated via the number of Monsters hunted down and killed. So, the Hunter's union handed over the full responsibility of assigning the hunter's rank to the Monster Store a long time ago.

"The rest of the remuneration amount should be deposited into the account number you have provided us with, after the final calculations are carried out. Anyways, isn't your dismantling skill really great? And the achievements you have piled up so far is also amazing.... It's scarcely imaginable that you've been a Hunter for only a month now."

The female government worker smiled as she spoke up to here.

"....Is that right. Wasn't aware of it."

Maintaining his expressionless face, Sae-Jin just grabbed his new Hunter licence and turned on his heels to leave.

Sae-Jin received the title of Lowest Tier Hunter around 30 days ago. The registering process was really simple and easy. All he had to do was to catch a single Monster and bring it in, thus becoming a Hunter from then onwards.

After becoming a registered Hunter, Sae-Jin decided to sell around 2~3 portions of Monster materials every 4 days or so. More than that, it'd be too eye-catching and he might be seen as someone suspicious, and due to his current condition, he'd rather avoid such kind of attention with all his might.

Obviously, Sae-Jin wasn't the only person in the entire world to possess a Trait but, nobody in their right minds would believe the crazy talk of 'a Trait changing a person from a Human to a Monster.' It'd be more believable, instead, to claim that a Monster was posing as a human. Actually, there was an incident like that not too long ago, and the new term Monster Man was coined from that very incident.

'...40 minutes left.'

This Store was the closest to the Monster Field but to someone like Sae-Jin whose very life was directly linked to the ticking clock, he still had to leave quickly.

- Yesterday afternoon, around 7 o'clock. At the mountain regions of Gangwon Province, a strange incident occurred in the so-called 'Monster Field.'

Sae-Jin's footsteps were halted by the sounds drifting from a television. The interior of the Monster Store was configured similarly to that of a modern bank and for those waiting in queue, a hologram TV with absurd clarity was installed here.

-This was an incident in which one Brown Wolf rescued Hunters from the dangers of getting eaten alive by another Brown Wolf. Recorded by the Low Tier Hunter Mister Kim Tae-Jo using a Recording Lens, these images were uploaded to Social Networking sites and were widely shared by many people. Shall we take a look?

The anchor stopped here, and the projection changed to the playback of a blurry recording.

– Out of Mana bullets and his stamina depleted, stranded in a life or death situation, Mister Tae-Jo runs into a starving Brown Wolf. Unable to abandon his grievously wounded comrade, Mister Tae-Jo resolves to meet the Wolf head on and he grabs the shotgun with both of his hands.

The ugly shape of the starving wolf threateningly growling was the first image seen on the projection.

– He swings the rifle with all his might but as if he has given up, Mister Tae-Jo closes his eyes.

Then the projection blacked out for a moment.

– When nothing happens after a passage of time, confused Mister Tae-Jo ever so carefully reopens his eyes.

Now visible in sight was an image of another Brown Wolf, much bigger than the one before. The neck of the starving wolf that threatened the Hunters was pierced by the fangs of this creature.

– This giant Brown Wolf suddenly appeared and bit to death the other wolf attacking Mister Tae-Jo. However, Mister Tae-Jo still couldn't escape the feeling of despair. Because he thought this giant Brown Wolf would surely kill him now. But, this Wolf was different.

Instead of attacking, the Brown Wolf picked up the as-good-asdead fellow Hunter in its mouth before trotting off to somewhere in a relaxed manner.

- Seemingly making a gesture with its head to follow it, the wolf carries the fainted fellow Hunter and begins to head off to an unknown place. Mister Tae-Jo watches on dazedly for a moment before hurriedly getting up, cautiously following the creature.

Walking for a while, the blurry images of the distant border post finally appeared on the projection. Then the wolf put down the Hunter in its mouth and returned to the forest.

- After seeing the border post that can help the injured Hunter, this wolf lowers the man and coolly walks away.

The final shots were of the wolf's rear end, leisurely sauntering away.

"....That was cool?!"

- Right now, this recording has gained incredible fame in portal sites, Social Networking sites and various community chat rooms after being uploaded to Mister Tae-Jo's own SNS profile. The netizens are showing hot reactions at the recording, saying "Why does that wolf have such a handsome face? I want to keep him, no, I want him to keep me", "I might fall in love even if it's a Monster", "I nearly fainted at the broad, dependable back in the final frame."

"Heuheum."

Sae-Jin's back straightened in pride for some reason. 'Was it that cool?'

- After studying this strange incident, the experts are cautiously theorising that the wolf might be the 'growth type Monster' or a Spirit Beast.
- "A growth type Monster.... there were a number of them in the past but they have gone extinct for some time now. As the name implies, it's a type of Monster that could grow. If it's a Wolf, then it'll grow from Brown to Grey, from Grey to Ebony...."

...It seemed that the experts' words always get cut off in the middle.

- Yes, it's a really puzzling incident. If it's a Monster like that, even I'm tempted by the prospect of being protected by it at least once. And now, moving onto the next item. This morning....

At the words of the beautiful anchor, Sae-Jin's face reddened somewhat and he even coughed in embarrassment.

"Oho, how mysterious. I was out catching wolves yesterday, now I feel a little bit regretful."

"But wasn't that an Ebony Wolf?"

"Still. Aren't they all wolves?"

From somewhere, the conversations of Hunters waiting in line could be heard.

Sae-Jin took a glance at the direction of the voices, and thought that their outwardly aura was no joke. On their backs, they were carrying... bazookas?!

Feeling somewhat intimidated, Sae-Jin left the Monster Store in a hurry.

Exiting the Store, he caught sight of the road packed with throngs of people busy coming and going.

He couldn't help but wonder whether this was humans being ignorant to the inherent risk posed by the Monsters. Right next to their doorsteps were the mountains of Gangwon Province, the so-called Monster Field, yet he couldn't see a speck of worry in the faces of the passing crowd, or from the skyscrapers tall enough to stab the blue sky above.

Of course, the tallest building of them all was called the Eden and it was considered the Holy Land of the Knights, and the fair number of the crowd walking around should be either Knights or Hunters that could single-handedly kill a Monster, so, well....

"....Fuu."

Sae-Jin grandly sighed out. He just wanted to vent his frustration out. He felt wronged that all these people were living their everyday normal lives yet why only he had to go through such an unfair torment all alone. Unfortunately, he didn't have a lot of time remaining to lament on his troubles. He only had 30 minutes of Human Form left.

- But I'm okay with it.

Sae-Jin was trying to return to the Monster Field but the sound from an outdoor advertisement shown on a billboard display entered his ear. His sense of hearing had sharpened up considerably after receiving his Trait and he instinctively turned his head towards the direction.

- Even if the injury is grave, even if all my limbs are broken until I can't use them anymore, I'll fight on. I'm not doing it for wealth and honour, but for the people out there.

The images were from an interview with a Knight, blood all over his body, seemingly having prevented an attack from the Monsters just now. A pair of earnest-looking eyes, a manly jawline, hair dyed in blonde – even Sae-Jin knew of this particular Knight. Treated as the hottest commodity and appearing just about everywhere in mass media and countless talk shows, and possessing a Trait called "the Saviour of the Light," Knight Kim In-Soo.

– My name is Kim In-Soo, a Mid Tier Knight from the Gaebyeok Knights Order. (Gaebyeok means Genesis. Left as it is because, well, Genesis sounded too foreign.)

The advertisement promoting the Knights Order ended with the images of Kim In-Soo's face superimposed on top of the Order's Crest. Staring at the ad wordlessly, Sae-Jin's chest tightened with equal parts of indescribable bitterness and emptiness.

'It's also a Trait but... it's so different.'

Sae-Jin could only try to appease his aching heart and the deep sadness dwelling within with a grand sigh, before pitifully shuffling away.

His destination was the lonely and distant, impressive mountain peak, slightly hidden from the view by the drifting fog and clouds – the Monster Field.

It might have been incredibly dangerous there, but it was also a paradoxical place where Sae-Jin of now could feel most at home.

< 01. Becoming a Wolf (3) > Fin.

Chapter 4: A Goblin's Kindness (1)

Quickly shaking away the negative emotions that would always invade his mind whenever he went outside, Sae-Jin returned to his cave, one that resembled a respectable dwelling... more or less. He then set about formulating a new plan.

Now that he was a Grey Wolf, he could go a bit further away to hunt. The issue was... it was still undoubtedly dangerous. Even though his Trait Level was at 3 and had advanced from the Brown Wolf to a Grey one, the Monsters in the Low Tier hunting ground remained a tough challenge.

Besides the Grey Wolves within the Low Tier hunting ground, there roamed Monsters such as Orc Warriors, Skeleton Soldiers, and Trolls, each of them possessing powers greater than that of a Grey Wolf. The reason why these wolves were acknowledged as Low Tier creatures and could survive in this hunting ground was simply because they formed large hunting packs.

'It would have been nicer still if the Orc Form evolved as well.'

Judging by how only the Brown Wolf Form evolved, all three of his Forms – Orc, Wolf, Goblin – must have had different criteria, specific conditions assigned for each of them. If his Orc Form evolved into an Orc Warrior, then it wouldn't be a problem to continue using the same hunting pattern for catching Brown Wolves, but... unfortunately for him, that wasn't the case. Right now, his Grey Wolf Form possessed higher Physical Strength stat than that of the Orc Form.

'It means I must hunt in the Wolf Form...'

Sae-Jin emptied all the complicated worries out of his head and stood up to leave. Sitting here wracking his brain cells wasn't going to give him answers. For now, he'd go out there and take a look-see first.

He moved all four of his feet and left the cave.

*

- Krrrrng...

As expected, the laws of Low Tier hunting ground was far more dangerous than that of the Lowest Tier areas. The viciously growling Grey Wolves with feral eyes couldn't be compared to that of the lowly Brown Wolves at all.

If it was just comparing the body sizes, then Sae-Jin's current Grey Wolf Form was 1.5 times larger than the normal ones, but...

- Kwawawal!!
- Khwal!!

The spectacle of 6 ferocious Grey Wolves pouncing on a patrolling Orc Warrior and ripping it to shreds, was something he didn't find enjoyable or impressive to witness.

- Pureung...

Losing his motivation, Sae-Jin turned around and went another way. From his back, noises that eerily sounded similar to dogs voraciously chewing on a toy and a desperate, pained scream could be heard. Knowing that he wasn't on the menu for those wolves today could only give him a small sense of relief.

He then headed towards the outer area of the Low Tier hunting ground. This was after rolling his head around for a bit. Numerous Monsters inevitably gathered around a drinking water source such as rivers and lakes, which could create a potential killing field of sorts. Because of this reason, most of the physically weak Low Tier Monsters that lived in groups settled down in outer areas that were as far away as possible from the said water sources.

For instance... Monsters such as Goblins.

- Krrrrng...

Sae-Jin's thoughts proved to be correct.

His eyes sharpened abruptly, a deeply sinister grin plastered on his lips. In the distance, he saw a bonfire burning brightly, illuminating a quaint little village consisting of several primitive huts.

Sae-Jin slowly approached there. It was quite likely that he had found a village of Goblins nestling in this Low Tier hunting ground that practiced in medicine and witchcraft. These Monsters possessed pathetic physical strength. The things he had to be wary of were: if it was a Goblin practicing medicine, then he needed to look out for poisons; if a Goblin dabbled in witchcraft, then he had to be cautious against curses. However, it wasn't easy to defend against such attacks, so if a Goblin's rank was higher than Low Tier, then regardless of their own ranks, Hunters and Knights would see it as the number one Monster to avoid like a plague.

- Khreng Kkheng!!
- Ddhkeeng!!

Sae-Jin spotted two green-skinned Goblins. One of them had tattoos plastered all over its body. Must've been the so-called "Elite Goblin."

'They are medicine-types,' thought Sae-Jin.

He used his nose to make sure. The super sensitive olfactory sense of the Grey Wolf caught the unmistakable whiff of herbs, confirming his thoughts.

- Khreng!!
- Khreng!!

Two Goblins performed some sort of a farewell ritual and parted ways. Seeing this, Sae-Jin quickly lowered his body and hid in the tall grasses.

The one with lots of tattoos on its body, began walking towards where he was hiding. Judging by the binocular-like object as well as a pair of shoes the creature held in hand and wore on its feet, it seemed like this Goblin was heading out either to scout or to gather medicinal herbs.

Sae-Jin's heart beat faster and faster the closer the Elite Goblin got. One footstep, two footsteps. Unaware of the danger lurking in the bushes, the prey unhurriedly walked closer to the trap, and seeing this scene, Sae-Jin's muscles tightened in dreadful anticipation, unconsciously salivating.

As the time to pounce neared, he slowly rose up half way, his ears flattening to reduce air drag as much as possible. However, Goblins were clever and alert Monsters to begin with, and an Elite Goblin was even more so. In order to catch one, he had to exercise utmost discretion and maximum wariness.

-Khrrng?

As expected of a perceptive creature, the Elite Goblin stopped just short of the trap, sensing the aura of uneasiness permeating in the air. But Sae-Jin didn't wait and kicked the ground, pouncing on his prey.

Ignoring the distance, the terrifying beast rushed towards his target like a crashing wave of a tsunami.

"... It's far.

It turned out, the Goblin was just out of the initial reach. To make the matters worse, the creature had regained most of its composure as well. As a matter of fact, the d**n thing had pulled out a primitive blow gun and was trying to shoot it at Sae-Jin's direction. As befitting of the moniker "Elite", there was not a single shred of fear showing in its calm demeanor. All those tattoos weren't just for a show, indeed.

'Son of a bi*ch!!'

But Sae-Jin was far more desperate than the Goblin. His desperation, fuelled by the emotions of heartache and fear, pushed him past the physical limit of the Wolf's four limbs, and like grey-

coloured tempest winds, the Grey Wolf stormed in and sunk his fangs into the neck of the Goblin before it could mount a counterattack.

Almost at the same time, an alert window popped up as if it was a message of his victory.

- ► [Complete: breaking past the limit while running] Active Skill "Whirlwind Dash" has been acquired.
- Instantly raises the dashing speed. (Can be used in Human Form.)
- Calculated from the numerical value of the current Agility Stat, the skill can be safely activated (2 times) per day; exceeding this amount will put strain on the body.

Kwajeek.

Sae-Jin broke the neck of the Elite Goblin while reading the pop up notice. The dead Monster's blood seeped into his mouth, past his fangs. Then another notice window popped up into his view.

- ► [Complete: Traditions of Goblins, Inheritance of Memories.]
- Drank the blood of a Goblin specialising in medicine. Now, while in either the Goblin Form or the Human Form, the host can freely activate "the Elite Goblin's medicinal knowledge and concoction skill".

Sae-Jin tilted his head slightly. Was this a good thing? But since he was as good as in the middle of enemy encampment, he wasn't able to afford time to ponder this new development.

-Khreng Kheng!!

The hullabaloo raised by a beast's hunt roused a pack of Goblins and they were busy heading this way.

Sensing the overwhelming killing intent, Sae-Jin didn't even look back once as he fled the scene. The countless poison darts, obviously fired by the irate Goblins, inundated the air behind him,

but a Grey Wolf's running speed was far greater and rapid than they were.

*

The sight of a Grey Wolf excitedly shaking its hips with a booty of an Elite Goblin dangling in his mouth while walking back to his home in the Lowest Tier hunting ground could easily be described as endearingly humorous, somewhat.

"...?"

But in the middle of this trot, Sae-Jin suddenly caught a faint but pained whimpering from somewhere.

After carefully lowering the Goblin down, his ears stood up sharply to listen.

-Ha, ahhh...

So weak, it might die out any second, but it was there for sure.

It was a moaning of a person in trouble.

There was no need to think too deeply when a human wanted to help out another human being.

Sae-Jin picked up the dead Goblin again and quickly dashed towards the direction of the dying person.

After running full speed for a minute or so, he found a gravely injured figure lying on a thick grass. The injury on this person was terrible enough to make him turn his head away.

He could see intestines within the torn abdomen, crimson blood spilling out, and intermittently, the whimpers managed to escape from the lips in between the bubbling red stuff clogging her mouth.

Even though it was an incredibly serious wound that would have killed a person instantly, this person, a female, was still clinging on desperately. Her consciousness had abandoned her, but she kept on moaning in pain while both her hands were rolled in tight fists, as if she could not accept the fate of her impending doom.

- Khrrrng..

Sae-Jin knew who this woman was. Her race was an Elf... like human, her profession a Knight.

The daughter of the Master of the Raven Knights Order, reputedly the strongest Knights Order in South Korea, and only a step away from accomplishing the feat of the youngest-ever Knight ranked Highest Tier in the history – some even going as far as uttering that she could be THE representative of the whole nation and some outright admitting that she was the most beautiful female Knight in the nation – Kim Yu-Rin. (Me: Another Kim?! There are other surnames in Korea, btw. Also, not 100% sure of how to classify these rankings just yet. Will revise if more context is provided in the future.)

The claims of being the most outstanding beauty wasn't all empty talk, tough. Even while precariously striding on the boundaries of death, Yu-Rin's beauty still wasn't going anywhere.

But the description of her stunning beauty and admiration for her personality had to wait for now. All the honour and glory could only be maintained if one managed to live.

Putting down the dead Elite Goblin, Sae-Jin quickly assumed the Orc Form. As a giant Orc, this slender woman felt lighter than a feather. So, he even hoisted the Goblin carcass he was planning to discard over his other shoulder and hurriedly ran towards his base of operations.

He just hoped that he could make it in time.

*

Sae-Jin placed the woman down on the stone bed and changed to the Goblin Form. "Thanks" to his short height, he had to climb up on the bed to diagnose all of her wounds. And just like that, like a lie, he could tell exactly what potion he needed to make, and the ingredients necessary to make the said potion.

'A dream-inducing grass, jejeung liquid, a scorpion grass, and... a single low grade Mana Stone.' (I've no idea what this jejeung is. Left as is.)

Sae-Jin began rummaging through the belongings of the dead Elite Goblin. Thankfully, he found all the necessary ingredients as mentioned as well as a mortar and pestle inside the small rucksack it carried on the back. And the most important item in concocting the medicine, the low grade Mana Stone, he just happened to have a couple on hand, so that was that taken care of.

Sae-Jin began implementing the steps to create a potion as engraved in his brain.

Dividing the ingredients in equal measure, he poured all his efforts grinding them in the mortar. When the herbs were powderized to a certain degree, he then added the Mana Stone and resumed grinding away. That's when the miracle happened. The solid Mana Stone melted into a liquid that emitted a clear blue light, as soon as it interacted with the rest of the ingredients.

It didn't look any different from other emergency medicine on sale in the stores, but the effects would be heaven and earth in difference. Using the knowledge of herbs now firmly rooted in his head, Sae-Jin could ascertain the comparative advantage. It seemed like he made a mid grade potion. If the widely available emergency medicine could only heal the surface wounds, then his own miraculous potion would not only mend the deep injuries but also replenish the lost blood as well.

Sae-Jin applied some of the liquid on the woman's wounds and poured the rest down her throat.

And then, the miracle began. The frightening injury on her abdomen, with the internal organs on show, slowly but surely started to regenerate by itself, and her pale complexion that seemed to indicate that death was just around the corner, regained

some of the lost colours.

"Whew...."

Sae-Jin breathed out a sigh of relief, seeing the recovery of the woman below. Suddenly, several message windows popped up and obscured his view.

「Condition Cleared: A Goblin's Kindness.」

- Must administer a necessary aid to at least 1 human being. All stats rise by 1.
- The host can now assume the "Medical Goblin" Form instead of "Goblin" Form. All stats related to the Goblin Form will be adjusted accordingly.
 - ► Acquired the passive skill "Goblin's Craftsmanship."
- The host will receive bonus attributes when performing all jobs related to craftsmanship. (Manufacturing, Cooking, Cleaning, Healing, etc.)
- The skill's effectiveness will be reduced during the Human Form.

".....Eh?"

Not only did the Goblin Form evolve, he even ended up getting a skill to boot.

Sae-Jin toiled hard for the whole month, hunted like crazy until it felt like his back would snap into two, and still, he couldn't even get a sniff of a skill during all that time, but here he was, getting three of them in one day!!

Was this emotion that he was feeling right now one of profound happiness, unbridled panic, or inescapable emptiness?

Whatever it was, Sae-Jin just sat there, unmoving, and stared at the message windows.

Meanwhile, without a fanfare, a single modest tattoo manifested

on his forehead, just like that.

< 02. A Goblin's Kindness (1) > Fin.

Chapter 5: A Goblin's Kindness (2)

The rain started to fall. At first, the drops were light and fleeting, but soon intensified and flooded the small streams flowing down the mountains, as well as rapidly filling up all the basins here.

'Looks like it'll last a while.'

Sae-Jin finally let out a sigh after gazing at the rain for a long time. He was worried. What could he say to the resting woman behind him? What excuses sound plausible enough to prevent her from murdering him? For a highly ranked Knight like her who was aiming to become a person of the Highest Tier, it'd only take a single punch to erase any and all hints of the existence of a single Low Tier ranked Goblin.

"...*moan*..."

But he couldn't continue worrying and agonising for any longer. Even though it hadn't been an hour since the treatment, Kim Yu-Rin let out soft moans as if she'd regain her consciousness any time now.

The pitiful Goblin nearly jumped out of his skin from the sudden moaning and hurriedly ran towards the side of the woman.

"Are you al...."

A sudden thought popping out in his head stopped his words from coming out.

'A Goblin isn't supposed to talk in a human tongue.'

Having thought about it for a bit, he knew it just couldn't be helped. Really, a "regular Goblin" wasn't supposed to save a human. The usually-starving Goblins wouldn't be picky when it came to the matters of filling up their bellies, after all.

".....Hmm...?"

Tossing this way and that, fighting the various pains and aches,

Kim Yu-Rin finally opened her eyes. She could see a stone ceiling through the heavy, sleepy eyelids. Silently observing the unfamiliar ceiling for a short moment, she then suddenly sat up like a lightning bolt.

"...Euk!!"

Unfortunately for her, her action caused the still-healing body to scream out in pain. Her face crumpled in agony, she caressed the abdomen that was torn to bits just over 30 minutes ago.

But it was rather odd.

It was definitely true that the claws of a Sabretooth Tiger gouged a chunk out of her tummy. The horrible residual pain felt very real too. Yet, her abdomen felt just fine to her touch as if nothing was wrong.

"How are you feeling?"

Out of nowhere, she heard a voice of a man.

Yu-Rin let out a breath of relief and turned towards the source of the voice.

In the critical moment, she used the extra teleport scroll which she packed just in case, seeing that the others weren't working for some reason, but even that ended up sending her to a wrong place, so she thought she was going to die. But fortunately, a passerby happened to....

"Ah, I'm...."

A Goblin stood there.

Not only that, it spoke a human language. In Korean, no less.

She was going to get up and offer a bow of gratitude to her benefactor but right now, it felt like her head was flickering into a total blankness. The Goblin in front of her continued to yap on about something, but she couldn't hear any of it. No, her brain actively denied it.

"....What... what the hell?"

Thinking that she must be still suffering from the aftereffects of trauma, she deeply closed her eyes and reopened them. But it was the same as before. She rubbed her eyes and stared again.

"Uh....."

No matter what, the situation remained the same.

"What the hell? Am I going crazy?"

Unable to hold it in, she dazedly spat out the words.

"Nope, I'm real."

Sae-Jin was also somewhat frustrated. That was because Goblins had really poor abilities to string together a decent sentence, unfortunately. Even the most unwanted, useless traits were beginning to mirror the real thing, it seemed.

"Wah, it really spoke. Maybe I've died already?"

Yu-Rin covered her face with both her hands and lied back down on the stone bed.

It took quite a long time before she could come to accept her current situation.

*

Sae-Jin did his best in trying to convince Yu-Rin while facing down her disbelieving gazes. One mistake, and he'd be a dead meat in seconds, that's why.

Sae-Jin's story was simple but plausible. His story was that, he was different and cleverer than other Goblins ever since his birth, and after growing disillusioned from the deceitful ways of Goblins, he ran away, then he met a Hunter and although imperfect, learned to speak the language and the mannerisms of humans. Of course, the Hunter met his end in an unfortunate incident some time later.

It wasn't the most detailed and water-tight setting or a plot, but thankfully, Kim Yu-Rin didn't suspect his words too much.

Her openness was partly because whether it was a Goblin or not, he was still her saviour, and also because not much was known about how various Monsters lived day-to-day. After all, if there was a Monster capable of taking on a human shape, then surely, there must be a Monster that could speak a human language.

"...So that's what happened.... Regardless, thanks for saving me."

With a more relaxed manner, Yu-Rin gently rubbed his head while smiling weakly.

Even though it was gentle gesture, Sae-Jin's body went rigid. Finding this funny, Yu-Rin lightly giggled out.

"Haha... You're a strange fellow...Euk."

Her body condition still didn't allow her to leisurely laugh out, and she had to grab her abdomen while her face crumpled from the stabbing pain. Sae-Jin quickly gave her another batch of the premade potion that suppressed pain and healed the wounds.

"Should I drink this?"

Seeing Sae-Jin nod his head, Yu-Rin smiled and took a big gulp of the potion.

"...Wah?"

Yu-Rin let out a gasp of pleasant surprise almost right away. Like a miracle, all of her pain simply disappeared as if it was all but a lie.

"You got some sick skills, don't you?"

She smiled brightly and resumed rubbing the head of the Goblin in front of her. It looked like the little guy enjoyed her gesture, she figured.

"Thanks. Really, really, thank you. I made it because of you."

To Knights who constantly clashed against Monsters, Goblins were nothing more than a lump of bad memories they'd rather soon forget. Poisons and curses were two of the most difficult elements to deal with for the human Knights that lacked the resistance to them. And of course, the ugly outer appearances of Goblins only added more to that negative impression.

But right now, for Kim Yu-Rin, the fact that a lifeform known as a Goblin was standing in front of her didn't matter one bit. This Goblin that possessed intelligence was unexpectedly kind and she found it rather cute as well.

"...Ah?"

As she absentmindedly rubbed the Goblin's head, the bracelet tightly wrapped around her arm suddenly started vibrating.

It seemed like the Order was calling her, at a quick glance. It was likely that they were trying to contact her after she failed to return long past the end of her assignment.

"That's right, my assignment..."

Her assignment.... was unfortunately, a failure. On top of that, she could have suffered the fate of an indescribably gory death, too.

But thanks to her heaven-defying luck, she met this Goblin and was able to overcome her fate. And now, this encounter had given her a chance instead.

'An investigation will find the evidence left behind by those who tempered with the teleport scrolls, and the two Knights that shoved me into a sure death situation before escaping by themselves, Yu Jong-Yun and Kim Sa-Rang... No, it's safe to assume the entirety of the 2nd team are involved here.'

In just over 2 years, Kim Yu-Rin's father, Kim Hyun-Suk would have to step down from the position of the Knights Order Master, after his term of office comes to an end. And the favourite to fill the position was not the current Vice Master of the Order, Oh Jong-Hyuk, but was, in fact, Kim Yu-Rin. The current situation was at point where two opposing sides, one supporting Yu-Rin and the other the dissatisfied Vice Master, were engaged in shadowy struggles for power, and what had happened to her today could be best described as a result arising from the said struggles.

Was it necessary to stoop so low like animals just because they felt like the time was running out, with her rank advancement ceremony being next month, she angrily mused. Yu-Rin ended up gritting her teeth.

Those six bastards that abandoned her right in front of the cave of a 40-year old Sabretooth Tiger, a creature so tough that a highly ranked Knight would find it difficult to fight against it alone; and the mysterious identities of the ones responsible for making 7 teleport scrolls, her Mana enhanced armour, and even her weapons malfunction at the critical moment.

"Thanks. Because of you, looks like now I can pull out all the weeds in one go." (Lit. said, hit them all in one go.)

She had no choice but to cool her boiling anger for another day in the future.

Kim Yu-Rin gently smiled and continued to rub the head of the Goblin, before slowly speaking up towards the bracelet.

"Upper Tier Knight, Kim Yu-Rin, will return...."

Yu-Rin then stopped and took a quick glance at the Goblin, before breaking out in another soft smile and changed the contents of her message.

"No, I shall return in about 3 hours time. It's raining too hard. And because of heavy rainfall, a landslide blocked the exit of the cave I'm in."

Sae-Jin and Yu-Rin talked a lot during those 3 hours.

Rather than a conversation, though, it was clear which role belonged to who.

Since it was difficult to form a proper sentence as a Goblin, Sae-Jin naturally ended up in the role of a listener and Yu-Rin as the talker.

"Haaaah, how could it be possible that I never got to enjoy a romantic relationship once in all 27 years of my life.... Ah, but it's not a problem unique to me, nope."

"...Why is she so lively like this? She sounded so cold and unapproachable in TV interviews."

Sae-Jin found it wondrous just how easy-going and talkative Yu-Rin was, which was totally out of his expectations. When he saw her on TV, she seemed more calculating and cold rather than someone easy to talk to.

"Honestly, I really adore gifts like plain and cute dolls, you know? But the boys only see the Knight side of me and end up giving me only the useless presents like knives and swords and magic armaments, so how can I go out on a date with knuckleheads like them?! And also, when I kick them to the curve because of their mistakes, they spread around rumours of me having high standards and try to make me look weird..."

But Sae-Jin was satisfied right now. Who would be able to listen to the private grumblings pouring out from the Korea's most famous female Knight like this?

He listened to her complaints for the next 3 hours all the while suitably responding at the right moments and pretending to not understand when difficult words came by.

Actually, he was busy observing her face. Even after spending 3 hours staring at it, he simply couldn't get enough of her beauty that easily transcended past every praise laid down before her.

Finally, like a sign, the rain stopped falling and the sunlight brightened the sky just as the end of the promised 3 hours came.

"When I have the time, I'll come and visit again. It may be a little late.... but I promise to definitely repay you properly then."

In the face of the imminent end to their short meeting, Yu-Rin hesitated somewhat, turning to look at him several times.

It seemed like she wasn't happy with the level of gratitude shown to her saviour and felt apologetic about it.

But Sae-Jin didn't feel that way. Instead, he was so thankful, he might even go mad from the excitement.

Yu-Rin gave him a fang of the Sabretooth Tiger as a compensation. Befitting a Knight of her calibre, she didn't just single-sidedly lose to the Monster but actually managed to successfully break one of its fangs.

If it weren't for the recently acquired knowledge of the Goblins, he'd have treated this fang as nothing more than some expensive japtem, but now, it was a different story altogether. The fang itself was a Mana Stone and at the same time, an ingredient in concocting medicine. If he carefully added other ingredients to it, then he could make 10 bottles or more worth of potions with various effects and properties.

A hurried, cursory recollection of the potential uses revealed that he could make a potion to drastically increase his constitution and thus show a tremendous prowess during a hunt, or concoct something like the one he made Kim Yu-Rin drink just now and sell it to the public – the possibilities were truly endless.

As an added bonus, he didn't have worry too much about gathering attention if he started making and selling potions. Normally, it was possible to sell, once cleared of having side effects and approved for consumption, the privately-brewed potions even while maintaining a relative anonymity.

'In other words, I can make a profit of a minimum of \$440K.'

As long as there was a healing effect, even the lowly emergency medicine that wasn't treated as a proper potion was worth \$175 per bottle. He also remembered seeing in a news segment that, in a test performed on medicines concocted by a human, a dark Elf and a Goblin using the same ingredients, the stuff made by the Goblin turned out to be the best of them all.

'And I happen to be a Goblin. A great Goblin, no less.'

With this, he could earn enough money to buy equipment and also buy himself a nice house in Gangwon Province.

"Thank you!! Take care of yourself!!"

Sae-Jin bid Kim Yu-Rin farewell with a pair of very happy eyes. Right on cue, a clear sunlight descended down between them. It was especially a nice weather to say goodbyes.

"...Ri, right!! You take care of yourself as well!! Don't go to dangerous areas!!"

Yu-Rin's voice was trembling slightly, wet with heavy emotions. She felt a tad sad seeing the bright expression of the Goblin – after all, she had opened up her heart to it for the past 3 hours and in the process she grew closer to this creature.

But she couldn't delay matters any longer.

Yu-Rin hardened her face and turned around, commanding her heavy feet to move.

"Yeah!! You too!!"

Hearing that somewhat ordinary voice, she was pretty sure the short time she shared with the intelligent and kind creature would remain etched in her memories for the rest of her life.

< 02. A Goblin's Kindness (2) > Fin.

Chapter 6: A Goblin's Kindness (3)

A week after the unexpected meeting with Kim Yu-Rin.

First, from the fang she gave to him as a present, Sae-Jin was able to create 4 batches of potions. One potion for strengthening the constitution of its drinker, and the other three, healing and regenerative effects. He'd stashed the former for himself when he went out on a hunt, but the rest, he decided to sell them off.

He was already getting fed up with this living-in-a-cave lifestyle, plus with the Energy Manipulation Stat now at 8, which made it possible to maintain the Human Form for at least 80 minutes every day, Sae-Jin decided it was high time he bought a house near the Gangwon Province. Of course, as expected of a place called the "Paradise for the Monster-related industry", the exorbitant land price here was second only to the capital city, Seoul, ensuring that even if he started working to his bones starting now, it'd still take a long, long while before he could afford one. (Lit said "A Mecca for the Monster-related industry. Changed for obvious reasons.)

Whatever the case may have been, currently Sae-Jin was standing in front of a building called an "Alchemy House" that reeked of a bitter aroma of the herbs and was filled with the bubbling sounds of chemicals boiling in their pots.

While there were less than three Alchemy Houses existing in any given large metropolis, these exceedingly rare organizations were the only place where the administration of the verification process, which assigned the grades as well as handled the distribution of the potions created by the alchemists, could be done. But, even though it was true they were hard to find, for someone like Sae-Jin who literally lived inside the borders of Gangwon Province, seeking out one of these so-called homes of an alchemist proved to be rather simple, with their continued survival intrinsically linked to that of the Monsters' existences. (Had to change quite a lot in this paragraph. This author sure loves

to torment me with indecipherable Spaghetti soup of words...)

"Hmm..."

Even though he wore the robe supposedly favoured by alchemists, and had the hood pulled right up to match the outer appearance, Sae-Jin's actions of curiously surveying the surroundings easily revealed his status as a complete noob at these sort of things.

"Is there something I can assist you with, perhaps?"

An employee came in closer and politely inquired after noticing him meandering.

"...I'm here to sell some potions I've created. But I haven't sold one before, nor have I any prior fame. Is it still possible?" (전력lit. battle records. I mean, wut)

"Ah, yes, of course. Would you follow me this way, please?"

Didn't matter what territory or nation, the number of alchemists were always much lower than that of magicians, and consequently, they were treated as one of the most valuable human resources out there. And, even though there was this whiff of a newbie coming off of Sae-Jin, his word and posture were undoubtedly that of a real alchemist, so the male employee made sure to remain courteous while guiding him.

Sae-Jin promptly found and sat down on a nearest office chair, and nervously waited as he kept an eye on the watch but soon enough, the male employee sat on the opposite side with a document of some kind.

"This is the application form. The verification process will commence after you write down the name of the potion and its effects here. When the product's been verified to be free of any side effects and its medicinal efficacy ascertained, a grade will be assigned according to its medicinal strengths, and afterwards, the potion can be sold on the market."

Potions brewed by the skilled hands of alchemists enjoyed a far greater demand than the supply could ever meet. Those commonly available 'emergency potions' sold in Monster Stores, mass manufactured with 10th grade Mana Stones, couldn't even begin to compare in performance and overall quality.

And the popularity enjoyed by the potions brewed by a well-known alchemist was such that potential buyers had to reserve their share very much in advance in order to purchase one.

Strangely enough, it wasn't the alchemist's name that garnered the attention, but the potions themselves instead. It was because, alchemists loved anonymity and believed hiding one's true identity from the public was a matter of professional virtue, so the only avenue available to truly flaunt their abilities was through their potioncraft.

It was a given, then, the alchemists painstakingly chose suitable names for their creations and didn't hesitate to pour every fibre of their beings and every ounce of their talents into bettering the potions they made.

Of course, the rumour on the street was, that for those famed alchemists who had already achieved great acclaim and were well known throughout the world, they could afford to just deal directly with the Masters of the Knights Orders and the CEOs of the corporate worlds.

"If you wish to keep your identity hidden, please check that box labeled Anonymous over here."

Sae-Jin unhurriedly jotted the words down on the application form. For the potion's effects.... healing and regeneration.

All of a sudden, the body of the male employee trembled noticeably from the shock as he took a sideways glance at the contents Sae-Jin was writing down.

When Sae-Jin glared at him questioningly, the employee

scratched the back of his neck and sheepishly made an excuse.

"Ah, my apologies. It's because regeneration is quite a rare effect... to clarify, did you mean regenerative recovery of the wounds, instead? Usually, a potion will be graded lower Mid tier even if the regenerative effects prove to be minor. And on top of that, there is also a healing effect as well.... Hahaha. As long as there are no side effects, this potion will be graded as High, surely? Many Knights Orders and hospitals were getting concerned at the shortage of High grade items lately... so this is great news."

Sae-Jin lightly smirked at the employee. He knew there wouldn't be any side effects with the potion. Since a word like perfection was not nearly enough to describe the skills of an Elite Goblin capable of combining the ingredients and the powder of the Sabretooth Tiger's fang down to a nanogram accuracy.

"I've completed the form."

"Ah, thank you. Just in case, have you brought along a sample of the potion?"

The employee asked Sae-Jin as he handed over the form.

"Well, rather than what you'd call a sample, I've got the finished product here with me."

Sae-Jin produced a glass bottle containing the potion from the robe's pocket. A clear blue light emitted from the liquid inside and the small area around the bottle glowed softly as a result.

" "

In that moment, the male employee became completely speechless. After a lengthy deliberation brought on by the indescribable beauty of the potion, the only thing he could do was to swallow back his saliva, hard.

There was just no way a novice alchemist could concoct a medicine that had both the effects of healing and regeneration. But there could be no doubt as to what this clear blue liquid emitting the brilliant glow was. Even without testing, even without assigning it a grade, this could only be the "Healing and Regeneration" potion.

".... This.... Please, wait a moment."

The male employee quickly recognised it as an item he was not qualified to handle. A value of a potion with healing effects was higher than other variety of potions. Obviously, people with jobs fighting back the tides of Monsters, Hunters and Knights, as well as the civilians occupying regular positions would have found such potions quite a necessity.

"Sorry, but I don't have much time."

Unfortunately, he just couldn't afford to delay any longer, so Sae-Jin stood up to leave. Seeing this, the employee went into a full-on panic mode and he quickly grabbed Sae-Jin's shoulders and made him sit back down.

"Wait, wait a moment, please!!! Just one moment!! The Manager will..."

The employee was desperate in his plea. In reality, the Alchemy Houses were actually high-stress organizations dyed in the colours of cutthroat competition and the pursuit of the robust bottom lines.

To be in a better position to receive the "financial assistance", the twenty-odd Alchemy Houses spread throughout the country were engaged in a bloody war of results, and the matter of which potion came out of which House located in which province played the most important role in achieving the best results. In the situation where a quality potion came up for sale, then the House would occupy a more favourable position when the inevitable petty squabbles should break out between the Knights Orders and various other institutions that wanted the potion for themselves.

That was why the employee was adamant about keeping Sae-Jin

here, but he was firm with his reply.

"You don't need more than a few drops for the verification purposes, so I shall leave behind three. There shouldn't be a problem for me to return at a later date after the testing process is finished."

"Ye, yes, that is true, but... Wait, the stamp. Did you already stamp your jijang on the form?" (A jijang is literally a finger stamp. Can't think of an English equivalent and it's not really leaving a fingerprint, so....)

The alchemists wishing to stay anonymous were specially managed through their jijangs. So, while most employees didn't know of the name nor the face of an alchemist, they could still tell which potions were brewed by that particular person.

"Yes, I did. I saw the blue-coloured number 30437 spreading out on the form."

That number meant that his application was 30437th for this particular Alchemy House. Seeing that there were less than 1000 variety of potions on the market, there was no real need to ask just how many aspiring alchemists out there had to taste despair during the grading and verification processes.

"Yes... in that case... please promise me to come and visit us later on!! That you'll return to us!!"

The employee bowed down and shouted out aloud. It was loud enough to reverberate around the interior and caused the surrounding gazes to focus here, but to those familiar with how the Alchemy Houses operated behind the scenes, it was only at the level of yet another day at work.

"Ah, yes. Well, do you have a preparatory bottle for the samples at hand?"

At his words, the employee hurriedly moved to find a sample bottle, and Sae-Jin left the Alchemy House after leaving behind precisely three drops worth of his potion inside of that tiny little glass bottle.

*

The downtown of the city was filled with all sorts of sounds. Conversations from the passing traffic of people tumbled around one another, mixed with the various noises of the city – Sae-Jin found it hard to adjust after getting used to the stillness of the mountains.

But even among this jumble of sounds, there was this one voice that attracted his ears especially so.

- Knight Kim Yu-Rin, there are only 2 weeks left until your Highest Tier Knight ascension ceremony.... How are you feeling right now?

The sound was coming from a wrist-mounted hologram TV displayed in the electronics store, the projection showing an interview performed by a reporter with Kim Yu-Rin.

- Not too bad.
-Yes? Ah, haha. Ahahahaha. Is that so? Of course... Hahaha. It wouldn't be bad at all, hahaha!!

The reporter could only just about diffuse the tricky situation the uncomfortably short answer brought on with several awkward laughters.

Sae-Jin smirked lightly as he watched. He knew why she acted that way, after all – something about the phobia of being in front of cameras or something like that.

- So, so then... let's proceed to the next question. Ah, yes, after being voted No. 1 as the most beautiful Knight by the male counterparts, can you please tell us how you feel....

The reporter forgot the rest of his question momentarily after he got properly sucked in by the infinitely clear gazes of Yu-Rin

staring at his face. It might have been an ordinary gaze in truth, but her beautiful face made it seem much more extraordinary than it really was.

- Obviously, it's not bad, as well, no? Ah, no, wait, that's... what was it again...?

The reporter finally managed to open his mouth and sprouted nonsense for a second or two, before his professional mentality brought back his game face back on and he quickly changed to another question.

- Ah, that's right. Can Miss Yu-Rin enlighten us to what your ideal man entails? It's just that, several hotly trending male Knights have all chosen Miss Yu-Rin as their ideal partner, you see.
 - An ideal man..?
 - Yes, yes.

Yu-Rin thought deeply for a moment, before breaking out in a grin.

It was short, but stunningly beautiful enough to dye not only the projection but the entire grey street surrounding the store with brightness. The reporter was lost for words again, while Yu-Rin replied with that dazzling smile still on her face.

- I prefer a man that's like a Goblin.
- Yes? What do you mean by that...?
- Except that he'd have to be intelligent and kind. In other words, a Goblin that's both kind and skilled.
 - Ah...

The reporter ended up interpreting her words that sounded unrealistic as something like 'no ideal man for me out there', or such.

- Ye-yes, of course. Thank you for your candid replies. As expected of the youngest ever Highest Tier Knight, the qualities for

your ideal partner are indeed very unique.

But Sae-Jin was different. He stood there staring at the image of Kim Yu-Rin for a long while with a huge smile on his face, before entering the shop properly.

"Welcome~."

"Ah, yeah, how much for that wrist hologram TV? Oh, wait, will it work even deep inside a cave up in the mountains?"

*

While the employees of the Alchemy Houses were mostly the "specialists" who gave up walking the paths of alchemy mid-way, the roles of Managers could only be filled by the actual alchemists. An alchemist had to register a minimum of three potions in the bestseller list in order to either open up an Alchemy House or to sit in the apprentice position of a Master.

The Dark Elf alchemist Hazeline, who rose to the Alchemy House Manager's seat at a young age of 31, was currently making an unreadable expression on her face as she examined the sample potion left behind by the mysterious visitor earlier today.

"...Hey, why am I even looking at this? Hell, this doesn't even need to get verified, either. At the very least, it's a mid grade. And at most, a High grade. It's been awhile since I saw a potion this bright and clear. And like a schmuck, you sent away the guy who brewed this by saying that you needed to test it?!"

"My apologies... I have no excuses."

"Oh well, at least, with him leaving the sample behind here, the possibility of us doing business together is rather high, so no need to apologise. Anyhow, what's it called?"

"Ah, that is... it's a little strange."

The male employee hesitantly checked the application form Sae-Jin wrote, but in the end, stutteringly read aloud what was written on the paper.

"A Goblin's Kindness. That's the name of the potion."

< 02. A Goblin's Kindness (3) > Fin.

(So, a confession time. The author keeps saying High, Mid, Low and stuff like that while describing the tiers/rankings of the Knights and Hunters, potions and Monsters, but hasn't really provided a context to go with them so far. I did a quick Google and lo and behold, the word 고위 기사 used to describe what Kim Yu-Rin's ranking was, which literally means Highest/Superior Knight, actually was the Korean TLed term for the Protoss High Templar from the Starcraft games. Y'know, that one Koreans all go mad over. So, uh.... should I rename all of the Knight rankings to that of Protoss system? What about that of the Hunters? And Monsters? Hmm...)

Chapter 7: A Heavenly Gifted Hunter (1)

It was an ordinary afternoon.

And just like any other day, Sae-Jin came to the Monster Store to unload the Monster materials when, out of the blue, the lady government official demanded to see his Hunter Licence.

"Here, please take this newly issued Hunter Licence."

After the official did this and that with the new card, he noticed that there were new and different words from before added to the front of it.

"The Heavenly Gifted Hunter...? What is this?"

Sae-Jin asked, his head tilting slightly.

"Ah, that is what you call a Title.... It's just a nice, simplified way to describe your current set of abilities."

"Eh?"

"Didn't you bring in Monster carcasses worth 23 creatures within your first month as a Hunter, Mr. Kim Sae-Jin? Because you satisfied the conditions, a prefix was added to your job description. Overflowing with a great talent, that's what the title Heavenly Gifted means. It's really a rare and wonderful Title, you know. You can't receive it if you've been a Hunter for over 6 months, and also, the Knights Orders actually do prefer this Title over the likes of The Seasoned Pro or The Distinguished Individual." (The latter one was something called "관록있는" I've no idea what this is, and Google was no help either, so, I made stuff up. Oh well...)

The government official explained with ardent fervor and zeal, but Sae-Jin showed little interest as he lightly nodded his head. After all, this wasn't a very helpful tale for someone like him who could only maintain his Human Form for 80 minutes a day.

"...Thanks, I guess."

"Ah....wait!!"

When Sae-Jin turned around to leave, the government official shot up from her seat and lightly held onto his sleeve. As he frowned and stared at the official with questioning eyes, she quickly pushed forward a paper at him while her cheeks reddened in a bashful manner.

"This... Please take a look at this!!"

"....Huh?"

A government official's trying to sell me something? Even though Sae-Jin was slightly speechless, he ended up finding the shy female official twisting her body in embarrassment, objectively speaking, rather adorable in his eyes.

There was still... 66 minutes left.

"What am I reading here?"

He asked out aloud as he checked out the writings on the paper. The large words "Public Recruitment for Hunters by Pabaek Knights Order" were written on top, and below that were some fine prints detailing what's what.

"Pabaek is a government-owned Knights Order with its headquarters located in our neck of the woods, and currently, they are looking to hire capable Hunters. Of course, it's true that only the ranks of Mid Tier or higher can possibly apply, but.... I'm sure that Mr. Sae-Jin's Title will receive a favourable consideration in this case! Besides, the plan was to upgrade your ranking to low Mid Tier or higher as soon as Mr. Sae-Jin satisfied the required amount of hunting experience, you see."

To clarify, the widely accepted definition for a low Mid Tier Hunter was "Can hunt a Low Tier Monster if three people with similar skill sets gather". And for a low Mid Tier Knight, it was the exact opposite – "Can deal with more than three Low Tier Monsters at the same time, alone."

That's why Sae-Jin's existence was a little, no, very special to the eyes of this lady official. In most cases, Hunters formed parties of three or more when moving about, yet here was a man that always came in alone, and always left by himself as well.

"Well, are you... interested in taking this opportunity? If you want, it's possible to apply right here and now. Mr. Sae-Jin will be accepted right away when you submit your application, I'm sure of it! In the past, Hunters with the Title Heavenly Gifted all got scouted by the famous Knights Orders even before they've been active for less than a year. Heck, some even went and converted their professions and became Knights in the end, you know!"

She became slightly desperate and her grip on Sae-Jin's sleeve got a little stronger.

He was going to decline right away, but then, he found it a bit regretful too, looking at the lady official's round, clear and sparkling eyes. It was a sight of a woman actively pursuing him, something he had never experienced before in his life yet.

A man's worth was indeed judged by his abilities, thought Sae-Jin. To see a cute woman, a well paid government employee to boot, acting so aggressive like this.... It was indeed a mystical yet somewhat difficult new world for him to tread in. If it weren't for his Trait of being a "Monster" he wouldn't even have a chance to do so, but at the same time, he couldn't really go around boasting his achievements either, precisely because of his condition as a "Monster"...

".....Is that so?"

When Sae-Jin's lips wiggled and formed an indecipherable smile, she mistakenly thought the talk was proceeding swimmingly, and so she smiled happily and added a bit more to the sales pitch.

"Yes, of course!! Hehe... By the way, there's... a favour I'd really, really love to ask you related to this..."

It was right at this moment. Sae-Jin swallowed that mysterious smile back down. His intuition, forcibly cultivated by being subjected to many painful things at a young age, went off like an alarm bell in his head. It said, don't listen to the rest, just leave as soon as possible.

"So... when you are recruited, please, would you mention my name, Kim Hye-Jin, as the person who recommended you.... What the, wait a second!! Please, just a second!! Mister Sae-Jin!!" (Another Kim?! I'm telling you right now, there are other surnames in Korea, too....)

Before she could finish her sentence, Sae-Jin was already leaving the Monster Store at a walking speed that bordered on a full-on sprint.

Hunting became a lot easier, after his Goblin Form morphed from being what he previously thought of as a useless burden to one of the most valuable assets in a single day. That was all thanks to, of course, the Body Strengthening potion and its effects.

After "doping", the Orc Form now exhibited strength that equalled an Orc Warrior's. But as Sae-Jin went around with a steel mace bought from the local Monster Store, when it came to the matters of overall destructive power, he could easily overwhelm an Orc Warrior that only knew how to wield a crude weapon.

His doped Grey Wolf Form might have displayed a similar level of increased destructive prowess, but unfortunately, the Wolf's limbs strengthened so much that he couldn't fully control the resulting speed boost so, for now, until he got more familiar with the changes, he had to hunt in a form that most resembled a humanoid shape – an Orc.

"Geuahahah-!!!!" (WTF?!)

And the warcry he made just now before the battle, was

completely instinctual. When in the middle of the battle, the rabidly-boiling fighting spirit made him feel like he was an invincible warrior from some legends of the distant past, and it became harder to endure the rapidly-mutating madness without roaring out aloud. (Jesus on a pogo stick, this sentence was so choke-a-full of tough Hanja characters my brain actually imploded trying to TL this sh*t up. WTF, indeed.)

"___"

But his opponent didn't respond at all. Par for the course, really. Its entire body made up of bleached bones, this b*****d was not much different from a corpse reanimated by a Lich using Mana.

Kwaahahng!!

A dull-bladed scimitar collided with a steel mace. There was no need to even confirm the end result. The forest shook violently from the explosion of noise and the shockwave from the collision, while the skull and the scimitar of the Skeleton Soldier were literally blown into smithereens. Standing proudly amidst the broken white bones scattering in the air, an Orc was busy enjoying the wonderful taste of his victory.

[Condition Complete: Required Experience Points Attained]

- ► Trait Level now increased to 4.
- ► All Stats rise by 1, and all Stats related to Forms will be adjusted accordingly.

And his happiness could only double while silently observing the message window popping up into his view.

His elation couldn't last for long, though.

The tall grasses shook, and there were sounds of feet leaving traces on the ground. He had sensed people's presence nearby.

They weren't close, but neither could they be described as far, so Sae-Jin quickly assumed his Human Form. His survival depended on it.

In truth, the most dangerous element for Sae-Jin in the Monster field wasn't Monsters but fellow humans. With the notable exception of Trolls, he could more or less contend with the rest of the Monsters found in this Low Tier hunting ground, but then, there were the existences called the "Knights" whose powers were just too ridiculously beyond the realm of the common sense. One mistake, and if he got spotted by one of them, then it'd be curtains for him, just like that.

That's why he always maintained all five of his senses at the highest possible state of awareness. The clothings he wore during his Monster Forms were different from when he was in the Human Form, and thankfully, when he changed, the clothes changed along with him like magic, making it possible to pull the ruse off rather splendidly.

"....Huh, it was just a person?"

Just in time, as Sae-Jin was relaxedly reaching down to grab the Mana Stone from the fallen Skeleton's remains, a party of Hunters emerged from the bushes. This 4-person party carefully studied Sae-Jin's apparels for a bit before offering greetings when they saw the mace in his hands.

"Ah, hello there!"

Hunters were not "friendly" with Mana, and as a result, their bodies weren't as powerful, so they couldn't utilise close-range combat weapons. The only remaining weapon of choice for them was the type of guns that fired Mana bullets. That's why these Hunters mistook Sae-Jin as a Knight instead. Plus, there was that deafening noise earlier, so they assumed his Knight rank was, at least, a Low Tier.

"Haha, what a coincidence. It's quite a rare thing to run into other humans in a Monster field, see...."

A guy who seemed to be the leader of the party approached Sae-Jin while carrying a disarming smile. But when Sae-Jin showed no reaction and simply stared back at him, this Hunter promptly produced a business card from his inner pocket and handed it over.

"We're Hunting Team 1, from the Taereung Knights Order. My name is Kim Ji-Han, a upper Mid Tier ranked Hunter, and these guys are... well, it doesn't really matter. They are just still young hatchlings, after all." (OMG. Another Kim?! I swear, this author hates other surnames. Has to be it.)

On the face of this rather expensive-looking business card, the letters "Upper Mid Tier" were embroidered in gold ink. It seemed like that a veteran Hunter employed by the Knights Order brought along a bunch of promising eggs on a demonstration hunt for the express purpose of educating the young 'uns.

"Is that right."

"Yeah, hahaha. These guys here somehow managed to hit the rankings of lower Mid Tier within 2 years, but the fact they are still clueless hatchlings, that haven't changed at all... Oh, if it's not much trouble, may I inquire which Knights Order you're affiliated with...?"

Kim Ji-Han asked in a friendly voice. He figured that making a friendly connection with a Knight would never be a bad thing and only prove advantageous for him in the long run.

Of course, that was only if Sae-Jin was a Knight in the first place.

"...Ah, I think you're mistaken about something here... I'm not a Knight."

Sae-Jin replied while pocketing the business card.

At the unexpected answer, Kim Ji-Han's head tilted slightly while carrying a confused expression on his face. Then his gaze drifted towards the scattered remains of the Skeleton Soldier on the ground. To utterly annihilate a Skeleton like this singlehandedly, and to claim he wasn't a Knight?

[&]quot;....So that means..."

"Ah, I'm also a Hunter. Good to make your acquaintance. My rank is a Low Tier."

Ignoring the flabbergasted expression of Kim Ji-Han, Sae-Jin offered his hand for a shake while smiling amiably. Somehow grabbing hold of the offered hand, Kim Ji-Han continued his disbelieving expressions.

"Ah... well, that was a joke... right? Haha, well, your sense of humour is pretty good, I must say. But, you know it's not permitted, right? A Low Tier Hunter isn't permitted to hunt in the Low Tier hunting ground alone. I mean, if a Low Tier rank can chase down a Monster alone, then why stay as a Hunter and not become a Knight instead, right? Ahahaha!!"

"Haha... is that so? But it's the truth."

Sae-Jin could now maintain his Human Form for 90 minutes thanks to his level up just now, but that was still not enough. He quickly pulled out his Hunter licence and showed it to Kim Ji-Han.

"Uh? This is a real Hunter licence.... eh?"

Ji-Han's eyes and mouth widened as he discovered something incredulous on the card after he examined it back to front.

"The Heavenly Gifted...? Could this be..."

Ji-Han momentarily stopped talking and simply studied the man in front of him. The Heavenly Gifted – this was one of the greatest Titles available among the Hunters, only granted to those who could, within the space of half a year from the beginning of one's career as a Hunter, kill over 20 Monsters in a month.

Those possessing this Title were all invariably got scouted by the biggest Knights Orders and it was a common occurrence to see many of them switching their profession to that of a Knight instead.

At the back of the licence, there was Sae-Jin's hunting record, and as expected, it was quite a remarkable thing. Maybe it was all

down to the difference in talent. 23 Monsters in a month, and to top it off, all self dismantled and disposed of. This record was so overbearing that, even though Kim Ji-Han knew this guy's ranking was two tiers lower than his, he found it impossible to say anything about it.

"...This..!!"

As Kim Ji-Han studied the licence some more, his eyes lit up brightly all of a sudden. He finally noticed the space for "Affiliation" was blank.

Regular Hunters hunted in either one of two ways. One was to form a temporary party with other Hunters, and the other was, like Kim Ji-Han here, to become a Hunter employed by a Knights Order and hunt in a designated team.

But it wasn't a given that the former was a worse choice than the latter, and that the latter option wasn't always a better of the two. There were enough Hunters out there choosing the first option simply because they didn't enjoy being in a strict group environment and all its accompanying rules and regulations, even though they possessed enough skills and abilities to enter a Knights Order.

"You're not affiliated with anyone yet?!"

"....Ah, yeah. Somehow, it's like that, but I like moving solo. I'm not thinking of joining anyone."

Sae-Jin was adamant, but Kim Ji-Han thought that he was clearly the latter case. So, with a smile on his face, he presented Sae-Jin with another business card.

This time, it was for the "Taereung" Knights Order.

< 03. A Heavenly Gifted Hunter (1) > Fin.

Chapter 8: A Heavenly Gifted Hunter (2)

Kim Ji-Han handed over the "Taereung" Knights Order's business card to Sae-Jin.

"...As I mentioned before..."

"I know. The thing is, though, human minds can change at any time, no? Honestly speaking, trying to tough it out alone, especially in our profession as Hunters where we already enjoy a pretty short life expectancy, isn't going to work out in the long run. Of course, I'm sure there are pluses to going solo. But hell, don't you agree that being unable to participate in The Fissure Exploration is too big a missed opportunity?"

In this world, there existed a separate dimension called The Fissure. A place that existed between dimensions, a world between worlds – that was a Fissure. There were numerous, countless Monsters infesting a Fissure, and the only way to "erase" one was to kill every single Monster residing within it. And there was the matter of pure, hard net profit that could be earned when erasing a Fissure which was at minimum, over \$890K, or, as much over \$9 million. It didn't matter if you were a Hunter or a Knight, participating even once in a Fissure Exploration was a sure-fire way to earn not only great fame and acclaim, but a healthier bank balance as well.

"Give it another consideration. When paired together with a Knight, a Heavenly Gifted Hunter can shine even more, you see. Ah, right. Before that... Did you take down that Skeleton Soldier using that mace?"

Kim Ji-Han asked in a tone of voice that implied he couldn't understand how it was done. It was just plainly impossible for a regular person to defeat a Low Tier Monster alone, after all.

"Yes. It's a quality weapon for sure but... my family members all had inherited strong constitutions."

"Oh.... if you say so..."

In today's world where the abilities "Mana Utilisation" and "Mana Affinity" were strictly divided into two distinct categories, the normal remained within the bounds of the common sense, but there was no longer any limits applicable for the ones deemed exceptional.

Those with good Mana Affinity didn't need any special teachings to accumulate Mana other than to just breathe, and in time, they could become the proverbial super-men that were fundamentally different from the likes of normal citizens out there.

Although few in number, these Superman types did exist among the Hunters. They were existences that fell just short of becoming a true, full-on Knight as even though they possessed enough affinity with Mana, they still lacked the necessary Mana Utilisation, so most of them ended up eking out a living as Hunters. Of course, it was still a special power that the regular, powerless people wished they could have it too.

"Alright, I'll think about it. Now then, excuse me, I'm running out of time."

There were still around 10 minutes left in the clock, but Sae-Jin felt it was slightly burdensome to deal with people right now.

"Right. Well, if you change your mind, we'd appreciate it greatly if you give us a call first. Our Taereung Knights Order is famous for treating all its members very well, regardless of whether it's a Knight or a Hunter, you see."

Maybe it was in consideration of a Grey Wolf's supposed strengths, the agility, his overall size didn't increase even after the the Trait level hitting 4 but, his ferocious, dangerous aura now easily equalled that of a great tiger. And hunting became quite easier too in the Wolf Form without resorting to doping now.

Most of the Low Tier Monsters died after a single surprise attack from Sae-Jin. He'd saunter into a thicket to hide and wait for a prey, and in that moment when one entered the killing zone... With a shocking explosion of speed that didn't even leave behind a blur, his fangs would sink deep into the necks of his victims. If one was tempted to describe this hunting method, it'd be "One Hit, One Kill."

Sae-Jin abused the newly acquired active skill "Whirlwind Dash" which made catching at least two Monsters in a day a lot easier than before.

Even today, Sae-Jin was leisurely drifting around searching for prey in his Wolf Form. Its sensitive nose was truly outstanding. Plus, this sense of smell wasn't some abstract, ambiguous nonsense that was like, "it smelled heavy so it's close by", or "it smelled faint, so it's far." Nope.

[Southeastward, 680 metres, Humans, 3 presences]

Yep, that's how this system worked. By receiving this wonderful assistance of the cheat system, he was able to hunt over 10 Monsters in the period of past 3 days.

'Humans again?'

There were more people hunting in the Low Tier ground than compared to the Lowest Tier, so it was a common occurrence to run into other humans. Carrying a dissatisfied expression, the wolf slowly began to vacate the current position.

"Today's luck is good."

"…!!!"

Out of the blue, a voice of another person entered Sae-Jin's ears as he began wading into the tall grass. It was really close. Strangely, there weren't any scents in the air so, while panicking, he quickly scanned the surrounding area. About 200 metres from where he was, he felt a presence. Could he run away? He thought

about it, but deemed it too dangerous. Immediately deciding what to do, he changed into the Human Form right away.

"...It's a human."

Fortunately, thanks to his deft timing, he was safe. Sae-Jin calmed his heart and turned to look at the owner of the voice.

It was, weirdly enough, a party of two. One was a girl young enough to be under the legal voting age, and the other was a huge dude wearing a formal three piece suit that seemed totally out of place here.

"Well, hello there~."

The girl studied the lone Sae-Jin in curiosity for a bit before greeting him with a little nod of the head and slowly got closer.

"My name is Yu Sae-Jung, a Low Tier Knight."

The bob-cut hair that came down around her neck, a straight nose and a pair of intelligent eyes – she should definitely be a teenage girl when considering only her young face, but the slick, urbane aura she gave off made her seem much older and experienced.

"Ah, hello."

Unwillingly shaking her hand, Sae-Jin reaffirmed that he had made the correct decision. Since she was a Knight, even if he assumed a Monster Form and hoofed it, the whole thing might have turned into one tiring mess. Meeting face-to-face once and parting ways smoothly was a hundred times more preferable.

"And this here is a Low Tier ranked Hunter, Yun Do-Han."

"....How do you do. It's nice to make your acquaintance. I'm named Yun Do-Han, a Low Tier Hunter."

As the man bowed his head, Sae-Jin's face dropped slightly in amazement. Yun Do-Han's looks and the get-up all made him look like a highly-ranked Knight or some such, but in the end, he

turned out to be some measly little Low Tier Hunter, of all things...

"Were you in the middle of a hunt? Your stealth skill is seriously incredible. And I don't see any special equipment on you, even."

Yu Sae-Jung scanned Sae-Jin from top to bottom, and sent him a compliment in a soft voice.

Nowadays, networking & making connections in a hunting field were seen as more important than the whole "graduated from the same school, came from the same neighbourhood" schtick, which Yu Sae-Jung was acutely aware of. Of course, there was that unwritten rule of how the potential persons making connections needing to possess outstanding abilities first, but here, unknown to himself, Sae-Jin had passed this young girl's initial test.

"Yeah. It's better to erase all traces of yourself when tracking a prey. Like the way you have erased your scents."

"Ah..."

As soon as Sae-Jin eyed her bracelet and spoke, she let out a soft cry.

"You've got a pretty sharp eye, there. By the way, I still haven't caught your name as yet..."

"Ah, my name is Kim Sae-Jin. A Low Tier Hunter."

As soon as he finished speaking, her body shook for a very brief moment. And then, with her head slightly tilted in uncertainty, she began questioning him with a voice that was a degree colder than before.

"...Is it okay for a Low Tier to move alone like this?"

"I'm still alive, so yeah, it's okay."

The initial interest she showed, had completely deserted her after his short reply, and so, she gave him a curt little nod. Obviously, she too had mistook as him as a Knight, just like others had so far.

"Yes, well. Whatever... Do carry on with whatever you've been doing until now. Seems to work for you, so."

She derisively snorted once and turned around. And seeing that cold demeanor, Sae-Jin couldn't help but to frown a little. Seriously now, just how old was she to live her life so cold and calculating? Sae-Jin shook his head in disapproval before heading towards the opposite direction.

But his feet became ensnared by the message window popping up in front of his view.

[Eastward, 500 metres. A Troll in a Ravenous State]

"...Oh, f*ck."

A Monster with a face that resembled a withered, cracked bark of a tree, and the body size that could reach well over 3 metres tall when fully grown. And capable of making shrewd movements that contradicted its giant body.

A kind of Monster that made people automatically swear out, that was a Troll in a nutshell. Didn't matter whether it was a Low Tier, a mid Low Tier, a Mid Tier, or a upper Mid Tier. All of this Monster's characteristics were equally applicable to every Tier there was. Of course, since it resided in the Low Tier hunting ground, this Troll was weaker than the others in different areas. But the real trouble was that Ravenous State warning.

Trolls were unique in that they rarely displayed what could be seen as the common species-specific behavioural patterns and habits. That's why Monster researchers preferred to study Trolls, and they were sometimes called the only Monsters to possess "individual personalities."

In the middle of those individual personalities, Ravenous State was the rarest and also happened to be the most concerning one, too. As the title implied, it really, really craved for food. What differentiated this state from the others was, Trolls suffering this

infliction grew stronger the more Monsters they digested.

To make matters worse, the Troll in the Ravenous State would see unprecedented growth potential in this place, the Low Tier hunting ground. After all, it was the most powerful Monster roaming this area and there was literally nothing here that could oppose or threaten its growth, so a Troll would soon grow strong enough to rival a Mid Tier creature in terms of pure strength.

"...Wait!!"

After hesitating for a moment or two, Sae-Jin quickly ran towards Yu Sae-Jung on the other direction and grabbed her shoulder. Even if her conducts were uncool, it was still the right thing to do to warn her of the impending dangers, after all.

"...What the, hey, what gives!!"

Totally unaware of the approaching disaster, Yu Sae-Jung slapped his hand off her shoulder in irritation.

"What is your problem?"

The guy next to her also butted in.

Even though he was pretty well built, since he revealed his rank as a Low Tier Hunter earlier, Sae-Jin didn't really feel scared of this man. And as if he could understand his own shortcomings, he withdrew behind Yu Sae-Jung with a slight fake cough when Sae-Jin glared at him.

"Hey, mister. What the hell are you trying to..."

"There's a Monster up ahead. We better evacuate."

No matter how urgent Sae-Jin appeared and sounded, she just disregarded him coldly before letting off yet another derisive snort.

"Fu. Only a trashy Low Tier Hunter like you would think of running away from a Low Tier Monste-"

Unfortunately for her, she couldn't get to finish her hostile

words of clear ridicule.

- Grrrrrr....

Strangely enough, a Troll's growl sounded rather similar to that of a common wild beast.

There it was, approaching them so fast with its huge 3 metre frame, and a face that seemed to be half burnt by the ghostly flames of the Underworld. Outwardly resembling a craggy hill, this Troll stopped in its tracks and surveyed the meals that were discovered coincidentally with a pair of greedy, oppressive eyes.

Affected by the terrifying visage of the Troll, Sae-Jin's eyes widened in shock and stark fear, and at the same time, Yu Sae-Jung very slowly turned her head to see what was behind her.

"...Ah, f*ck."

When that evil face filled up her view, she reacted similarly to how Sae-Jin did a bit earlier. Waking up from the fear-induced daze thanks to her swearing, Sae-Jin offhandedly thought that only now she was acting like a real teenager.

"... Do-Han Oppa? Do-Han Oppa!!" (Oppa: a term of endearment for an older male used by a younger female. Also lit. means older brother.)

"Eh... ah!! Ah, I got it!!"

She hurriedly called out the name of the dazed Yun Do-Han while drawing her weapon, a sword, hanging from her hips. It was then when Do-Han suddenly took on the posture to start running.

"....But we're in the Low Tier ground, though?"

The distance between this hunting ground and a military base with a Knight capable of dealing with this kind of threat was quite considerable.

"He's different from a trashy Hunter like you so don't worry about him. And you'll get in my way, so please, back off to the side,

will you."

Was it the ambitiousness of a youth, or naïve bravery? Yu Sae-Jung prepared to engage the Troll alone and raised her blade straight. And at the same time....

Ta-aaaa-ang...

Yun Do-Han ran off at near the speed of sound.

Sae-Jin didn't need to ask to figure out what happened. That kind of improbable movement could only be explained away with the involvement of a Trait.

- Grrrr....

The Troll got annoyed as one of its meals, Yun Do-Han, managed to disappear, and it began to growl even more aggressively than before.

"Fuu...."

She took one deep breath. As Yu Sae-Jung concentrated, azure-coloured Mana began to infuse with the blade of her nice sword. That was one of the most famous Mana Utilisation skills employed by the Knights, the "Mana Blade."

'That isn't going to work...'

Sae-Jin knew that was not enough for this Monster. And he noticed that the girl's slender arms holding the sword were trembling ever so slightly. It was a sign that she was already affected by the fear of the enemy even before the battle, and soon, that would lead her to an inevitable defeat.

Even though he wanted to lend a hand here, without a weapon it was just impossible for him to intervene. The steel mace he praised so much was currently nicely asleep in the corner of his cave at the moment, as he was planning to hunt as a Wolf today.

'Time to run.'

Out of ideas, Sae-Jin was about to run with his tail firmly

between his legs when,

[Condition Complete: Encountering an Overwhelmingly Stronger Monster.]

- The host has encountered a Monster with near zero percentage of victory. All Stats will rise 1.
- The Orc Warrior Form is available for the host instead of the Orc Form. All stats for Monster Forms will be adjusted accordingly.
- The Skill "Warrior of Reversal" has been unlocked. (This skill name isn't final. Couldn't really come up with an appropriate TLed term. Until I do, it'll remain so...)
 - ► Active Skill "Warrior of Reversal" [Current Skill Level: F]
 - Available during all Monster Forms.
- For 5 minutes, Strength increases by 200%, Endurance increases by 100% and resistance to Pain increases. (During Human Form, the time is reduced to 1 minute.)
- When activating this Skill in Human Form, the Stats will be based off on the Orc Warrior Form.
- Calculated from the current Strength and Endurance Stat, the skill can be activated for (1 time) during a 24 hour period.

Just like that, another one of those evolution message windows rose up before him.

< 03. A Heavenly Gifted Hunter (2) > Fin.

Chapter 9: A Heavenly Gifted Hunter (3)

Sae-Jin's eyeballs busily rolled around, trying to take in all the words appearing on the various message windows. At a cursory glance, they all sounded pretty dang great. However, what was up with this seriously bad timing – right now, he couldn't even let out an exclamation of happiness for this unexpected evolution.

"...That's not a bad skill at all."

The fact that the Orc Form evolved into the Orc Warrior Form was great, but his attention was currently with the new skill "Warrior of Reversal". It was truly a wonderful skill since he could use it even in the Human Form. And just as its suggestive name implied, the skill could change the outcome of any situation. In other words... a situation exactly like this one here.

'Now, what should I do about this girl, really.....'

He looked at Yu Sae-Jung with complicated eyes. Even though she was facing the Troll with outwardly overflowing confidence, she probably knew better than anyone that it was nothing but a false bravado. Really, anyone with eyes could tell that this Troll was in the Ravenous State, what with its appearance of falling gobs of drool from the lips and all.

Plus, this Monster was most likely a low Mid Tier threat now, judging by its huge size and the tyrannical aura oozing off from it. Nominally, a Low Tier Knight should be able to deal with a Low Tier Monster alone. To be ranked a Low Tier at that young age, her talents were something to be really proud about, but unfortunately, it was still way too much for her to fight a low Mid Tier Monster by herself.

"....*Sigh*..."

Sae-Jin let out a grand sigh. It'd take at least 1 minute for that other dude to arrive at the nearest Knights Order base, judging

from his running speed. However, what about the time needed for the help, in the form of high ranked Knights, to arrive here?

- Kwhaaang....

Taking time to think things through was an unaffordable luxury at the moment. Yu Sae-Jung's mana-infused sword clashed with the Troll's fist, and the resulting explosive shock waves, along with a roar, violently shook the lands they were standing on. She somehow avoided getting knocked out in a single punch by the skin of her teeth, but that was it, that was her limit.

- Vuwuououong... (TL: sorry, this is the best I could do with the Mana onomatopoeia...)

Her face was now full of panic, quite unlike 5 minutes ago when it was still full of arrogance and relaxed demeanor. But Trolls knew no such thing as mercy. The huge fists of Troll created a dark shade as they rained down on top of her head like a torrential rainfall.

Sae-Jin clenched his teeth. He still felt fearful no matter how his burning emotions egged him on to face the b*****d. He wondered if this was what the firefighters felt when trying to step into a maelstrom of an inferno.

- Thkwang!!

While he was hesitating, Yu Sae-Jung's body got struck by the Troll's fist and was flung away like a thrown baseball. Her fine sword got disintegrated into equally fine powder, and her cool overcoat-like battle armour became an ugly, twisted wreck, losing all its effectiveness in the process.

- Khung, khung.

The Troll made a huge racket as it advanced forward. And when it got near the downed Yu Sae-Jung, the b*****d raised its huge hand up.

"...What the?"

Quietly and weakly staring at this unfolding spectacle, Yu Sae-Jung couldn't even think about closing her eyes anymore. She just couldn't believe that this was happening for real. This crazy situation, this incredible pain that didn't even allow her to voice out how much it hurt, all of them felt like a bad dream to her. She just wanted to run away from this terrible nightmare. Only if she could wake up from this dream right away...

The Troll's huge hand slowly descended.

It was a trick of her mind, the slowing down of the time itself. Every thought fled from her head, leaving it completely blank. It was at this very moment.

- Kwhang!!

A man causing a whirlwind to kick up appeared out of nowhere and blocked the fist of the Troll. Only with his body, nothing more than his two pairs of arms and legs, and strangely no emission of Mana coming out of him at all. This guy had stopped the Troll's advances simply with his own physical prowess and nothing else.

His clothing got torn apart due to the Troll exerting a massive, awesome pressure and the ground supporting him caved in, but his stance didn't crumble one bit. He was truly taking the Troll head on.

Yu Sae-Jung observed this improbable spectacle completely speechless. This was an unreal scene that flew in the face of common sense. Since it was more dream-like than an actual dream itself, she somehow managed to convince herself that this was indeed reality and that it was indeed happening right before her eyes.

"....Go!!"

The guy hurriedly shouted at the stupefied Yu Sae-Jung. But, perhaps due the prior impact, she was suffering from dizzying tinnitus in her ears and couldn't hear him well. She shook her

head hard several times and only then could she get what he was shouting at her about.

"Get the hell away from here, you d**n idiot!!"

Right now, Sae-Jin felt like dying. The weight of this effing Troll was, simply put, completely, utterly insane. His bones felt like turning into smithereens from the cruel pain. But, he had no choice but to endure. He had to, since the reason for this all effort of buying time, the girl, still seemed out of it and was simply there spectating this scene.

"!!"

Maybe him mixing in insults woke her up, she finally seemed to get the gravity of the situation and began dragging her broken leg, somehow gaining a distance away from him. When she was well out of the danger, Sae-Jin quickly rolled his body out of the way.

- Pwuaaang!!

With an earth-shaking explosion, a crater in the shape of a Troll's fist was carved right on the ground where Sae-Jin had been standing just now.

- Krrrrr...!!

Seemingly pissed off at the sudden, unwelcome entrance of a hindrance, the Troll snorted out in anger and faced towards Sae-Jin's direction.

And at the same time, strength deserted Sae-Jin's body. Indeed, 1 minute was a really short amount of time.

Weirdly, though – he didn't feel any pain, even after the skill had ended.

Most likely, bones in both of his arms, as well as the nerve endings, got badly damaged in the encounter. He couldn't feel his arms at all as if they weren't there in the first place.

- Miss Yu!!

- That son of a bi*ch!! Hey!! Stop right there!!

But, like the timely blessings from the heavens, a booming, powerful and manly voice resounded from a distance. When the Troll heard that domineering lion-like roar, it showed signs of pure panic and hurriedly turned its head.

"You foul creature!!"

A baldy exploded out like a bullet from the tall grasses, splitting the air with his mighty sword that gleamed with a sharp metallic sheen. Then, towards the Troll, he shot forward a crescent shaped sword aura that was keen enough to tear out the sky. The supersonic aura didn't even give the Monster any time to take evasive actions, and it penetrated the torso of the creature unopposed, and soon after, the Troll's body split in half and fell in a heap as if it was nothing to begin with.

"Sae-Jung, are you okay?!"

The Knight that made all of Sae-Jin's death-defying efforts look meaningless by killing the Troll in one shot, hurriedly ran towards Yu Sae-Jung, who was lying sprawled on the ground with broken legs and her body utterly incapacitated.

"Sae-Jung!! This can't be!! How did your beautiful face get so..."

The man raised a huge fuss and gently hugged Sae-Jung's body.

"... My body won't move."

Out of the blue, Sae-Jung coughed out a clot of blood.

"Oh, my god!! What the hell!! Sae-Jung!! Sae-Jung~!!"

The man's face turned red and pale all at once as he cried while fussing over her, but at the moment, Sae-Jung's thoughts were focused on something else, so what this guy was doing only ended up bothering her.

Her face had become swollen up in the meantime and it was difficult to keep her eyes open. But she still forcibly pried her lashes open to take look at one specific person, a man.

His clothes were torn to shreds, revealing the hidden ripped, hard muscles like that of a Greek statue underneath. The limp arms on his sides were darkly discoloured beyond the purplish hue, his legs shaking uncontrollably as if he'd falter at any moment.

The man who had saved her, she didn't even know his name. But it seemed like he did mention it before... she must've forgotten it. She found herself pathetic, realising this. She should have remembered it.

It was then, the man gazed at her direction briefly, before turning to walk away to a destination unknown.

Yu Sae-Jung wanted to reach out her hands to the man walking unsteadily on his legs, seemingly only seconds away from collapsing on the ground. But her body would not move. She just wanted to ask him to wait for a second. But she seemed to have lost all feelings in her mouth, too.

""

So, the only thing she could do for now, was to engrave the back of the man as her heavy eyelids slowly closed down on her.

*

Fighting the urge to give up and fall down, he continued to push his body hard. Finding his bloodied and damaged body bothersome, Sae-Jin promptly changed into the Wolf Form as soon as he couldn't sense the presence of people. The wounds and the weakening consciousness remained the same, however. But he forced the two okay limbs to run as if his life depended on it. To lose his consciousness in the Monster Field was the same thing as dying, after all.

He ran without a rest until he finally arrived at the cave. Changing back to his Human Form, he hurriedly drank the potions he brewed earlier on. His arms couldn't move, so he had to pop the lid of the bottle open with his lips, but fortunately, his wounds recovered almost right away, so that was that.

But it was another matter altogether for his wavering consciousness. It seemed like this was one of the backlashes of using that skill. Sae-Jin passed out on the ground and fell into a deep slumber.

The greatest Knight Order in Korea was, nominally, the Raven Knight Order, but if the Knights Orders were grouped separately into the privately run entities and the government-owned ones, then the story became slightly more murkier to tell. Of course, the Raven remained as the example for other Knights Orders to strive for. But when discussing the private Knight Orders, the matters became complicated somewhat. There were 2 Orders considered to be in the top flight, 9 Orders in the mid tier, and further 12 smaller Orders out there, with all these numerous organizations busy competing against each other.

One of those 2 top dogs were called "Saebyuk" Knights Order, which was in turn, owned by a very powerful global conglomerate "Saebyukdahl". When the Order opened its doors, people regularly disparaged it for being a lowest ranked Order with only a wealthy patron supporting it like a personal plaything, but thanks to the rapid development brought on by that absolutely enormous wealth, the popular consensus had reversed and they were now treated as the very models of modern miracle. If the question of who the top Knights Orders were came up, the names of the "Raven", "Goryeo" and Saebyuk would have been mentioned. And of course, Saebyuk Order's financial treatment was incomparably better than all its competition. (Saebyuk literally means a dawn, Saebyukdahl is a moon appearing at dawn. Goryeo was a name for an ancient Korean kingdom.)

"It was not the fault of uncle Hyun-Oh. So, please stop

apologising. It's actually all my fault..."

And Yu Sae-Jung just so happened to be the granddaughter of Saebyukdahl's Chairman, one of the world's biggest corporations, as well as the daughter of the current Master of the Saebyuk Knight Order. She was an incredibly giant existence, a child born with an unobtainium spoon firmly stuck in her mouth, and was important enough to make a famous High Tier ranked Knight like Park Hyun-Oh to fret over her like this.

"...No, that's not it. Whatever the case may have been, I should've been right there, watching out for you...."

Not only her background was very impressive, her talents were just as perfect, however, as she received the official government acknowledgement as a Low Tier Knight at the young age of only 17 years and 45 days. This was only a month off from what Kim Yu-Rin had achieved – a Low Tier Knight at 17 years and 6 days – which only served to showcase Yu Sae-Jung's amazing talents that were basically without equal among her peers.

"Enough with the self pity, seriously, and I hope you have already uncovered the information I asked you about?"

"...Eh? Oh, that?"

The very first thing Yu Sae-Jung asked for after waking up from the two-day long coma was about the identity of a certain man. A mystery man that Park Hyun-Oh couldn't recall as he was far too focused on saving Yu Sae-Jung at that time – but she insisted that this mystery guy was the one who saved her life.

"Wait a minute, you haven't even bothered to check, have you?"

Yu Sae-Jung's eyes grew sharp enough to give chills at the sight of Park Hyun-Oh's hesitating appearance.

"No, no way!! Honestly, even I thought it was unlikely. I seriously thought that maybe you were seeing things. I mean, it's plainly impossible for a Low Tier Hunter to stop a Troll all alone.

However...."

He stopped speaking for a second as he began rummaging through his pockets, before he fished out a bronze-coloured Hunter licence.

"Here it is, for real. Even I was surprised, you know. Found it among all the shredded clothing on the ground."

Since Yu Sae-Jung couldn't move her body due to the paralysis, Park Hyun-Oh had to bring the licence card right before her eyes.

"A Heavenly Gifted Hunter, Kim Sae-Jin.... Wait a minute, a Heavenly Gifted?"

"Yeah. That's right. It's been a long time since I saw one of those titles, but hell, if you think about it, it makes perfect sense. I mean, all the Hunters with that crazy title were a bit... abnormal, weren't they?"

"...You can find him, right?"

"Of course. Already began looking for him. It's only a matter of time before he's standing right in front of you. Oh, right, before that, you are not..."

Suddenly, Park Hyun-Oh narrowed his eyes and intensely stared at Yu Sae-Jung.

Unlike her age, her actions were very grown-up but in the end, she was still a child. She was at an age where it wouldn't be strange to find her head full of unrealistic fantasies and useless ideas of romance. So, what if, in that dangerous life or death situation, she had developed a crush on the man that rescued her...

"Fuhut. No freaking way. That's not it. Me, I'm not a child. It's just that... it's like what Grandpa always have said. If it's a favour, repay it as soon as possible, and if it's a grudge, grind it out as long as possible. I've deeply engraved that teaching into my heart, is all."

Yu Sae-Jung carried an assured smile of denial, before she remembered something important, and asked with her brows raised high.

"That's that taken care of, but more importantly, can I be fully healed? I've heard by accident that my current paralysis is pretty serious."

Park Hyun-Oh stiffened up momentarily.

"You heard that? I thought you were asleep."

"Yeah, you guys did say it's really serious."

Only 10 years ago, paralysis like Yu Sae-Jung's would have been a very painful and incurable condition, but that wasn't the case any more. With the advent of alchemy and its continued research and development, nowadays it only took a single potion to cure it.

But her paralysis was more severe than the usual case, so it was determined that a powerful potion with a upper Mid grade or higher was needed to heal her.

"Don't you worry about that. I just got a news that there's an Alchemy House in Gangwon with a supply of upper Mid grade potions that can heal and regenerate. The effects of Gangwon's output has always been good, and since the Chairman made that very generous deal under the table with the House, we'll get the first dibs when they get the stuff."

"...Is that so? That's a relief."

Yu Sae-Jung nodded her head without showing much interest.

"What's the name of the potion though? Is it a product from one of the workshops on the Eastern Seaboard? I did hear they were still on strike. But did they end it?"

"Nope. They are still doing that industrial action thing. This is a new product. And I do mean, like brand-spanking new. I hear it's from a totally unknown personage, who just appeared outta nowhere, and left a seriously incredible product behind, just like that. The people handling the stuff apparently raised a huge ruckus saying that a new genius has appeared or some such."

"Okay, fine. Just tell me the name, will you."

"Well, yeah, the thing is... it's something of an untrustworthy name, you see."

Park Hyun-Oh hesitated somewhat to say the name out aloud, but under the sharp gazes of impatient Yu Sae-Jung, he finally relented and stuttered out the name.

"I did ask a few times if it was real... Well, the potion is called... A Goblin's Kindness."

< 03. A Heavenly Gifted Hunter (3) > Fin.

Chapter 10: A Genius of Alchemy (1)

"A Goblin's Kindness? What kind of a name is that?"

Yu Sae-Jung frowned a little as she spoke. It was just too weird a name to place her full trust in.

"You think so too?"

The credibility was everything to a potion, and so, it would be named accordingly to reflect the assigned grades and its medicinal effects. Take the reputable, widely recognised "Drent" series of potions for example; for the shallow exterior wounds such as cuts and bruises, there was the potion called "Drent's Emergency Treatment" for the job, but if you were looking to cure something more substantial, say, like a serious disease, then there was the upper Mid grade potion named "The Miracle of Drent."

On a side note, the Drent was the name of the legendary Tree of Life from the Elven myths that could supposedly revive even a dead person with an elixir concocted with only a single leaf.

But, there was this insurmountable gap between the credibility and that of a "Goblin". Instead, it'd be hundred times more correct to argue that there was a deep mistrust and hostility between the two. Despite all that, the alchemist still chose to stick with "Goblin" as the name of his potion....

"I was thinking the same thing initially, but when I heard the explanations, it all kind of makes sense. I mean, Goblins' abilities to make potions are something else, right? Seriously, there are idiots crazy enough to raid a village of Goblins specialising in medical concoction, never minding all that poisonous gases and hazardous material just for a chance to pilfer some potions, you know. And I hear it's been registered in the registry of the Naming Series already. I guess there is a lot of expectation riding on this potion."

A "Naming Series" was a type of a registered brand trademark.

When the anonymity is valued to such degree in the world of alchemy, the only avenue left to determine the credibility and the apparent effects of a potion was through its name – it could be confusing to the potential customers if another alchemist came up with a different potion but named it similarly, not to mention create distrust towards the makers of the potions themselves, so this trademark scheme was vigorously upheld as one of the absolute laws in the alchemists' society.

"Really? So the effects have been confirmed for real?"

"Obviously. Come on, honestly, would our Chairman and the Order Master try to buy something that's shady? And also..."

Park Hyun-Oh stopped his words, quickly scanned the surroundings, and suddenly leaned his face closer to Yu Sae-Jung's ear to whisper the rest of his sentence.

"The Manager, the Dark Elf Hazeline, already has given her affirmative, so you don't have to worry."

There was no real need to whisper in this single person "VVVIP" hospital room, but well, he was treating her as a royalty here so it was only natural for him to act this way.

The actual reason why the alchemists thought of anonymity as a virtue was that currently, almost half of all active alchemists were from the race of the Dark Elf. They were the type of people that hated exposing their outer appearances and always concealed their bodies with thick robes.

Many people assumed that the Dark Elves were incredibly beautiful since they were called Elves and all, but as they hated bright places with lots of humans with mad zeal, the number of witnesses who had seen a Dark Elf's real appearance was extremely low, as well as no records to speak of, either.

Heck, there was even a sinister rumour floating around, which

was now accepted by some circles as truth; in it the person who uploaded a very first picture of a Dark Elf online was hunted down and murdered by the very same Elf.

"Hazeline – she did? Then, it should be alright. So, when is the product expected to definitely come in?"

"Huh? Well, she did say it won't be too long.... Wait, let me quickly pop out and make the call, and ask her."

*

"Please wait for just a bit longer. Soon it'll be... here, surely?"

"...Hazeli.. – no, Manager Hazeline, what is the meaning of your sentence at the end? Feels like you're deliberately trying to obfuscate..."

"....You're mistaken."

"...Fuhu. Manager Hazeline. Our little Miss is a Knight of only 17 years young. She should be out there training and enjoying her life, not confined to a sick bed and doing nothing..."

"Yes, I'm well aware of that. Just as I have told you before, please just wait for a bit longer!"

The Dark Elf Hazeline ended the call in irritation and chucked the mobile phone on the desk. It was easy to tell that she was not in a particularly good mood, judging from her exaggerated heavy breathing, deeply shut eyes and fast massaging of her temples.

"Aieek...... Just when is that guy coming here? Didn't he say he got the completed potions already?"

Her ultra sharp eyes were immediately directed towards the waiting Alchemy House employee. The poor guy was already in a state of high stress before and now, he was sweating profusely as he barely managed to open his mouth.

"Ah, yes, I'm not really... He did mention that he had three completed potions in his possession..... We did call him on the

phone number he wrote down but so far there were no answers..."

"Haa.... D**n it all, this is pissing me off!! Seriously, I swear these human idiots must think that potions are hammered out in a single day! The reason for all this shortage of potions is because the alchemists are sick and tired of all this bloody nagging by the thoughtless sons of idiots!! But instead of fixing the error of their ways, these sons of bi*ches.... Awooo, this f*cking sh*t!!" (I've TL'ed this part as faithfully as possible, so, yep, she's got a mouth on her, this one.)

As the steam of her fury reached the proverbial top of the head, she rolled her fist tightly before slamming it down on the desk.

- Tuong...

Quite unlike all the explosive anger she had displayed just now, the resulting sound was rather adorably small; the door to her office flew open right at the exact same time.

"He, he's here, Manager Hazeline!! That alchemist from before, he has arrived!!"

At the hurried yell of the employee, Hazeline's eyes went round, her body shooting right up from the seat.

There were two types of alchemists out there. The first was the commonly known types that did the Transmutation and the Reconfiguration, while the second of the lot spent their entire lives trying to understand the mysterious liquid called potions. (Some anally retentive experts would call these two alchemists with separate terms, the former retaining the alchemist moniker while the latter, potion crafter.) (TL: This bit is by the author, not me.)

Even though their main skill sets used for their craft were different, the alchemists all still possessed one habit that was the same. And that common habit was, their preference towards the darkness.

"...Do you find the coffee to your liking?"

In this dark but surprisingly un-gloomy room, where even the sunlight failed to reach, the only thing brightening the place was Hazeline's dazzling smile.

"Yes."

Sae-Jin, to the best of his abilities, played it cool and lowered the cup nonchalantly, but he found it rather torturous to look at the face of the Elf in front of him. That was because, she was one of the most stunning women in the world, as befitting the "race of beautiful people", the Elf.

The shiny alabaster skin that didn't seem a right fit for a Dark Elf. With an indigo-coloured straight, long hair, and the finely crafted, beautifully harmonious facial features where there simply wasn't adequate enough a word to describe how gorgeous she was.

"Now that the introductions are done, should we get straight to the main topic, Sir Alchemist?"

Hazeline the Dark Elf had revealed her face, her name and her race openly to Sae-Jin.

He had to wonder whether she was mistaking him as one of her own race, as her open demeanor was quite a departure from all the rumours he had heard before. Easily reading into his confusion, she quickly moved to clarify her position, saying that she was trying to show some courtesy towards him.

"It's fine. We're talking about the potion I've brewed, yes? I'm also well aware of how good my potion is. It is my life's greatest achievement, after all."

Even though he spoke with such confidence, he knew very well that he was sprouting bullsh*t right now.

The Elite Goblin's knowledge base was full of compounding methods that easily exceeded the methods of top alchemists, and on top of this, Sae-Jin possessed the top ingredient, the fangs of a Sabre-tooth Tiger, so instead of a life's greatest achievement, he just needed around 7 days to brew this potion.

And that 7 days were actually for fermenting the contents which was an unavoidable process in making this potion, so...

"Of course, we are also well aware of the difficulties. In order to create a potion this effective, you must have struggled and toiled hard for many years. As a fellow alchemist, I understand it all too well."

Sae-Jin nearly spat out the coffee percolating in his mouth after seeing how grave she sounded and how serious her face looked. He still somehow managed to maintain his poker face, wiping his lips as if to get rid of hot coffee and nodded his head.

"It's good that you understand."

"Indeed. Since it's such a good potion... A few customers, having heard of the news, are wishing to purchase the goods even before it's on sale. And these here are the letters sincerely requesting you to sell it to them."

Hazeline pushed forward five stiff papers towards him. On them, there were instantly recognisable names of Knights Orders, big corporations and famous wealthy individual written in large fonts.

'How many zeroes are there... \$360K, \$440K, \$623K...???'

And the numbers written below each name was the kind of amount Sae-Jin wouldn't even dream of seeing in his lifetime.

"These are the legally approved sales commissions. There's a policy allowing an alchemist to deal directly with private individuals or entities provided the amount of product sold is less than half of your current stock. Of course, the government takes the cut in the tune of 48% as sales tax but since the potential customers add something a little extra on top of the market price when buying the product, in the end, it just doesn't matter at all."

[&]quot;Sounds good."

When Sae-Jin nodded his head in satisfaction, Hazeline who was observing his reactions carefully continued with her words.

"The thing is, though.... in order to secure commissions like this, not only the efficacy of a potion but the role of the Alchemy House is also very important, so we would be obligated to take a certain percentage as well. If a House with no connections receive goods like this, they would just put it up for sale in the markets without thinking too deeply about other matters. That is why..."

Hazeline slowly swallowed her saliva. Even though this was a normally accepted part of the Alchemy Houses' modus operandi, she was feeling nervous at the moment because of the incredible potion this person had brought in.

"In a sales commission like this, the House usually takes about half of the agreed amount.... We are prepared to lower that to 40%, no, make that 35%, specially for you. Any lower, then, even other Alchemy Houses will find it difficult to match. If you don't believe me, you can ask others. It's a pre-tax deductio..."

"Fine. It's all good."

Sae-Jin nodded his head, having no other opinion regarding this matter. Whether it was a Dark Elf, a regular Elf or a High Elf, he had not heard of instances where Elves defrauded the other party, and on top of that, the stuff she said matched with what he found online.

For obvious reasons, relying only on the information gathered on internet for something of this much importance would be foolish and undeniably pathetic. But that kind of thought was applicable only if when one didn't know of the Dark Elves' and alchemists' natures.

They all pursued anonymity. Once that was secured, these people communicated and acted more lively than before. And let's not forget, the Internet was the perfect place to communicate anonymously.

Stories of half the alchemists being gaming addicts didn't just come to life out of nowhere, after all.

"...Eh?"

When the conclusion came so easily, Hazeline couldn't help but stare dumbfoundedly. But like a pro, she quickly regained her wits, and before Sae-Jin could potentially change his mind, moved to put the finishing touch to the deal.

"If, if that's the case, then all you have to do is to stamp your jijang on the sales request form with the highest amount written on it!! The corporation Saebyukdahl is offering the highest amount with \$623 thousand US... Ah, wait, where did the stamping ink disappear to?!"

As she raised a royal ruckus while fetching the ink pad, Sae-Jin watched her and floated a mysterious smile. It was a deeply satisfying sight to behold, to see another person losing their marbles over him, something a socially underprivileged like him wouldn't get to experience under normal circumstances.

"Here it is!!"

When Hazeline hurriedly handed over the ink pad, Sae-Jin leisurely studied the contents of the form once more before stamping his jijang on it.

"Whew... Oh, by any chance, do you have the finished products with you at the moment? You did mention that you have three bottles back then, yes? We need the minimum of 2. The law says we must put the half of the stock on the open market, so the other can be sold through the sales commission."

"Oh... Well, I have brought all of them here with me."

Hazeline's eyes shone as she stared at the sight of Sae-Jin rummaging through his bag.

"A total of 4 bottles. All with the same medicinal effects."

"Oh, Ohhh!!"

Finally. The 4 bottles of potion emitting the exact same brilliant light as the samples revealed themselves to the world, and on Hazeline's face an uncontrollable, wild grin broke loose. But remembering her stations as the Manager of the Alchemy House, she quickly erased the ungainly smile right off her face.

...Of course, by then it was already too late, though.

"It's perfect. All 4 of them. What a relief~~"

She couldn't prevent her sentence stretching out at the end from the unbridled happiness, however.

Hazeline picked up one of the bottles, then she shook it, smelled it, studied it from several angles before putting it down, nodding her head in satisfaction afterwards.

"We don't need to test them. Oh yes. They are perfect. Perfect...."

She then asked Sae-Jin very cautiously while staring at one part of him that wasn't covered up by his robe – his lips.

"Weeell, there is something I'm slightly curious about. Just from where... did you study this level of alchemy? If it were any other normal alchemist, they would usually send in incomplete potions as examples to get a verdict on.... It's your first time and the product itself is beyond reproach, so even though I know I'm out of line, I still wish to inquire you."

"Hmm..."

At her inquiry, Sae-Jin briefly showed hesitation but he already had thought of a suitable story before coming here so he told her that.

"My master once taught me this. If there was even a fragment of doubt existing in your thoughts, then you are in the wrong, so throw away all useless ideas and devote yourself completely to the craft until you reach the true pinnacle. I am just following this teaching to the letter."

Alchemists and Wizards valued their master and apprentice relationship far, far greatly than any other professions out there in comparison, and because of this fact Hazeline nodded her head as if she was convinced.

"You have a truly wonderful master. I'm sure he's feeling quite proud of you as we speak. After all, his apprentice has become a great alchemist in his own right."

"Ah.... Yes. It's just that, it's regretful that he had to pass away before seeing me succeed."

Although he knew she wouldn't ask him for the master's name, but Sae-Jin still felt anxiousness creeping in up his legs, so to make sure, he hammered in the final nail in the coffin.

Plus, technically speaking, he wasn't telling a totally c**k and bull story anyways.

He did have a "master" that passed on all the knowledge and technique, after all.

....Even though he bit that guy to death.

"Oh, how unfortunate."

Hazeline, who didn't know the actual truth, bitterly accepted his version of the story and showed a heavy, sorrowful expression.

"Well then, if that is all. I'm running short on time."

In the blink of an eye, 30 minutes flew past, so unable to dilly dally any longer, Sae-Jin stood up first to leave. Hazeline followed him and also stood up, and reached out with her hand for a shake while carrying a content smile.

"For you Sir Alchemist who chose us, we'll definitely make the Goblin series known as the best potion brand in the world. You can place you trust in us. I'm planning to hold a press conference right after this meeting is done. Nowadays, playing up the mass media is

an important marketing strategy, you know."

"Ahaha. Well, thank you."

Sae-Jin faced her gorgeous smile and shook her hand firmly.

< 04. A Genius of Alchemy (1) > Fin.

Chapter 11: A Genius of Alchemy (2)

As soon as Sae-Jin left the Alchemy House, Hazeline grabbed her phone and called a certain someone.

"Hello, Sir Knight?"

"Hello, Miss Manager. I'd like to apologise for my earlier behaviour. I just happened to see the poor little Miss lying in the hospital bed before the call, so I just ended up losing my cool for a moment..."

His voice wasn't all that apologetic, but never minding that, Hazeline spoke in a rather leisurely fashion.

"Oh, no. It's fine. You see, the product came in just now."

"Oh!! Really!!"

Right away there was a loud yell. She could already imagine the sight of Park Hyun-Oh shooting up from his seat, his eyes bulging and yelling at the top of his lungs on the other side of the line. A slight sneer formed on Hazeline's lips.

"Fuhut. Yes. However, as I've mentioned just now, the product has only arrived here recently, so even though I'm planning to give it the highest grade myself, the Central Association must test it too in order to issue the sales permit for us."

"Ah, there's no need!! What kind of a fool would question Miss Hazeline's discerning eyes? In any case, I shall be there shortly. Please wait for me!"

"...Fuht. Alright. Please be careful on your way."

Disconnecting the call, Hazeline let out a breath of satisfaction and leaned her body against the back of the chair.

For her, it's been 3 years already since she took a step back from the world of alchemy after feeling intense dislike at the effing corporations and the foolish men and women of the Knights Orders.

Of course, even though she was no longer on the frontlines, the overconfident bastards still continued to harass her, but right in this moment, she felt good enough to soar high up in the sky. A brief moment when the dynamic between the monied "haves" and those who serve gets turned on its head, like when perfectly concocting a potion, or a well-made potion coming in through her doors.

"...Since he said shortly so maybe he'll take 5 minutes tops."

The high ranked Knights of the Saebyuk Order could utilise private jets that burned Mana Stones as fuel source. It was indeed a clear waste of resources to fly a supersonic jet to come to Gangwon Province from the capital city of Seoul since this wasn't an emergency situation, but taking into account the identity of the patient, he probably couldn't delay the matter any longer.

To greet the incoming guest, Hazeline put on the previously-discarded robe and pulled up her hood.

'But I won't hand it over that easily.'

The idiots weren't aware of the fact that the alchemist had already left his jijang on their sales request letter. If that's the case, then... she'd wring them out for all their worth, and make their innards boil with anxiety until they had melted into nothingness.

This was the kind of a light revenge only she could do, but when seen from the perspectives of those on the receiving end, it was probably the cruellest, evilest form of "habit" there was.

"Ah! That's right!"

She nearly forgot to do something else before all that. Hazeline hurriedly grabbed her mobile phone and called another person.

"Hello there, reporter Yun Hui-Jeong. It's been a while. Oh, it's nothing special. It's just that a noteworthy potion is finally available here after a really long while. Hmm? Oh, we've got a

quite a stock. 4 bottles. It's amazing, yes? Even for me, handling 4 bottles of a potion this incredible is a first. Yep. Oh my, thank you so much. I shall send over someone with all the necessary info. I'm expecting to receive the sales permit in 3 days, so when the time comes, please write up a nice piece for me."

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[The very first output of a genius that appeared like a meteor, the High grade potion, "A Goblin's Kindness" hits the market.]

「From Gaebyuk Daily, written by Yun Hui-Jeong, a staff reporter.」

8 o'clock this morning. A potion with a unique name called A Goblin's Kindness, brewed by a certain alchemist, was issued with the sales permit from the Central Alchemist Association.

The very first thing that grabs the attention is, of course, that name. It is said that the reason for the alchemist who brewed this potion borrowing the Goblin moniker, which could be seen as a minus, was because of a simple, yet hard to imagine hypothetical case of what would happen if Goblins showed kindness towards humans and used their potion making skills.

And to surprise us even more, his potion was deemed to possess perfect healing and regenerative properties by the Association and was assigned the High grade as if to imply that the alchemist must have had perfectly replicated the craftsmanship of a real Goblin. What's more, this potion, A Goblin's Kindness, just happens to be this alchemist's very first creation.

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This potion will go on auction which is scheduled to commence

at 12 o'clock 8 days from now, on the premise of "Yoseon" Alchemy House located in the city of Wonju, Gangwon Province. With this potion, A Goblin's Kindness, appearing like a sweet relieving rain in the times of seemingly unending drought, this reporter hopes that this event can perhaps inject some sense of life, even if it's small, to the market that has fallen into doldrums of late.

===

The mood in the headquarters of the Raven Knights Order located in the suburbs of Jongro, Seoul, was in somewhat heightened state with the appearance of a High grade potion after more than a half a year of shortage.

The Raven Knights Order that set its sights beyond the borders of Korea and competed for the top spot in the global stage, regularly battled the rare Monsters ranked upper Mid Tier or above, or those bastards that suddenly appeared and started attacking without a warning. The thing was, these upper Mid Tier Monsters each possessed unique special powers, making them true walking disasters and when confronting these creatures, the Knights' abilities proved to be rather inadequate most of the time.

In all honesty, rather than calling it inadequate, it'd be far more correct to say fear had crippled them.

After the unchecked, uncontrolled development of the Earth's environment, the Healing magic had currently all "died away", leaving the treatment of injuries caused by the Monsters to potions and the modern medicine. However, even though the modern medicine could reconnect severed limbs, it was not possible to regenerate what was lost, so the Knights ended up trusting and depending on potions over that of the modern medical technology.

But for the past half year, the supply of upper Mid grade potions that allowed the Knights to battle higher Tier Monsters without hesitation had dried up. Not only the potions with healing, regenerative capabilities, but also elixirs that boosted the physical strength for a brief period of time had vanished, too. So, when the news of the appearance of a higher Tier Monster spread around, the situation had devolved into a point where Knights couldn't relaxedly choose to go out and hunt them anymore.

"Did you hear the rumours?"

"Yeah. Got a weird name, though. But, uh, can our Order secure it?"

"Come on, why not. And I hear it's 40 ml per bottle, too. On top of that, 2 bottles for sale in one go."

"40ml should be enough for 6 people... With that, maybe, we can now finally hunt down that newly hatched Basilisk, right?"

The interest shown by the Knights of the Raven Order towards this High grade potion that had appeared out of nowhere was rather understandable.

"Hmm...."

In the front lobby of the Knights Order, Kim Yu-Rin was sighing out while reading the information sheet delivered from the Alchemy House for the new potion's effects and the expected prices. Even though there should be a lot of competition to secure this potion brought on by the long absence of one, she knew that if it was the Raven Order, there would be no problem acquiring the product at the end of the day.

'2 bottles... That means another 2 was sold through private commissions already.'

Kim Yu-Rin was crumpling her face in dissatisfaction. The Alchemy Houses gave out information first to those entities holding a favourable relationship with them in this kind of private sales commissions. In other words, the Raven Order that hadn't received the heads-up wasn't enjoying a cordial relationship with this particular House.

'If it's Yoseon Alchemy House, then it must be Hazeline's doing.'

Kim Yu-Rin slowly massaged her aching temples as the mug of Hazeline floated up in her mind.

Hazeline and Kim Yu-Rin. These two shared a bond that was thicker than blood of siblings, stretching back for almost 20 years.

However, that powerful friendship became twisted real fast thanks to a certain single incident. Which happened to be a stupidly, unbelievably simple misunderstanding. But more misunderstandings continued to pile up on top of another, turning the situation far worse, and once the relationship began to break down, the downward momentum couldn't be stopped any more.

Their fast deteriorating relationship finally came to a head 3 years ago that resulted in a very serious event.

Hazeline had poisoned Kim Yu-Rin's potion, and when Yu-Rin managed to survive after fighting desperately for her life, she cut Hazeline's arm clean off.

This ugly event remained a secret until now, only known to these two after they silently made an agreement, which led to either one not laying blames on each other nor telling anyone else regarding this matter.

And now, a few years had passed since both of them stopped caring about each other and lived their own separate lives. During that time, Kim Yu-Rin had fought hard and successfully claimed the prestigious title of the youngest-ever Highest Tier Knight, and Hazeline had created an elixir called "A Fairy's Liquor" to regenerate her lost arm and in the process had climbed up to the position of the Alchemy House Manager.

Like this, they both had firmly grasped the futures that were far brighter than their past but in the end, could only become the worst of the worst enemies possible. And now, the sporadicallyrecalled good memories they once shared together had lost their luster a long time ago. "Miss Highest Tier Knight Kim Yu-Rin!!" (TL: OMG. Sounds so wrong. Should I start using Korean honorifics instead? Please comment below.)

While she was swimming in the recollections of the past, someone had walked up closer and started chatting her up. When she turned her head to see who it was, she saw quite a number of Knights gathered there.

"Uh... What seems to be the problem?"

When she replied in her usual deadpan expression, the group of Knights consisting of 5 men and 3 women smiled brightly and presented a simple square box to her.

"It's a congratulatory gift for you, Miss Yu-Rin!! Congratulations on your ascension to the Highest Tier!!"

Acting as the representative of the group, a male Knight with a cute enough face spoke. He was Kim Soo-Gyeom, a junior Knight that served as a direct apprentice working under Yu-Rin for 2 years while she was still a Mid Tier Knight.

"Oh, right. Thank you, everyone."

Yu-Rin lightly patted the head of the male Knight that was as tall as her and received the gift. Kim Soo-Gyeom acted shyly at her touch and swallowed his saliva.

"Please open it!!"

Their strangely flushed expressions seemed to indicate that the present inside this box must have been a very nice stuff indeed. Seeing their excitement, Yu-Rin's own expectations rose as well as she opened the lid of the box. She already knew it was useless to expect much, though.

" "

- "Surprise!!"

Yu-Rin confirmed the contents of the box and observed the faces

of the knights in front of her with the corner of her eyes. Theirs were full of expectations. She didn't want to disappoint them.

"Oh, oh..... This, I really needed this. Thank you so much, everyone."

Befitting her reputation, she didn't jump up and down in joy but instead, just made an expression that displayed her gratitude. Thanks to her prior experiences, her acting skills were rather exceptional. No, in reality, it shouldn't even be called acting. She would've been happy with just the sincere words of the fellow Knights congratulating her.

"I'm really sorry about this. If it's a product of Zenobis, then it must have been really expensive..."

She spoke apologetically as she picked up the pair of gauntlets painted jet black. They were light but incredibly sturdy pair of armoured gloves, with the brand Zenobis stylishly carved on the sides. Since Zenobis was a exclusive workshop that only dealt with rare, high grade metals as the bare minimum requirement, the price of these gauntlets must have easily exceeded hundreds of thousands of dollars.

"No, no, not at all. We're just sorry that we couldn't get something better to show how grateful we're regarding everything you've done for us until now."

"I haven't done much, though. Ah, right. By the way..."

Yu-Rin carefully observed the reactions of the knights before asking them in a cautious manner.

"Did they only have the colour black?"

"Eh? Ah... No, no way. They had only the bright colours for the ladies' use. So we specially requested for a custom paintjob and had gauntlets painted in black. The colour definitely won't fade, so you don't have to worry."

[&]quot;Ah, oh....."

Yu-Rin thought that the bright colours would've been better. But she couldn't make a retort at the smiling face of Soo-Gyeom and instead, ended up weakly smiling as well.

Kim Yu-Rin, in her 27 years of life. Every single gift she had ever received in her life was all battle equipment, exactly like this.

*

Around the same time, Sae-Jin came to the Monster Store to unload the materials but was now staring at the TV projection with a deeply satisfied expression.

– It's been half a year but finally, a high grade potion is available for purchase in the market. Named A Goblin's Kindness and coming in 40 ml bottles, the price for this potion has been set to around the \$350,000 which is on the upper side of the range, but regardless, the influx of request for purchase has been coming not only from the local Korean organizations but from international entities as well. And ever since the Yoseon Alchemy House registered the brand trademark "Goblin", people have been eagerly waiting to see if there would be other potions with different medical effects than 'A Goblin's Kindness' that appeared in the market.

"Excuse me? Excuse me? I said, excuse me!!"

The government worker became fed up with Sae-Jin who was concentrating only on the TV and ended up raising his voice at him.

"Oh, sorry. My bad."

"Here, please take this. Mister Kim Sae-Jin has successfully increased his rank from a Low Tier to a mid Low Tier, after accumulating over 60 days worth of hunting experience...."

Sae-Jin couldn't focus on the procedure for long and his entire attention returned back to the sound coming from the TV.

- And when it became known that this was the alchemist's first

product, a huge amount of attention from the Korean and international community chatrooms has been solely focused on him, going as so far as to nickname the mystery alchemist as the "Goblin Alchemist" or even "The Genius of Alchemy". But the Alchemy House responsible for the circulation of the potion, Yoseon, has strongly suggested to curb the excessive attention focused on the mystery alchemist as they worry this sudden unwarranted scrutiny placed on the person in question might negatively affect him...

< 04. A Genius of Alchemy (2) > Fin.

(TL note: When trying to TL the term "네모 반듯하다" used to describe the box Kim Yu-Rin received, I referred to Google Translate just in case and it said... "Nemo is straight." I loled so hard, I thought I was going to die... It actually meant perfectly/nicely in a straight line or something like that.)

(Also, thinking about changing Raven Knights Order back to its original Korean name – Chilheuk.)

Chapter 12: A Spirit Beast, the Divine Wolf (1)

"Will it really remain as a series of potions? It kind of looked like our honoured genius alchemist is working alone without a workshop.... Ah, but how could he meticulously craft this kind of potion all by himself? Looking at things like this, you can really feel that geniuses do exist in this world for real."

Right now, they were taking a short break from answering the endless deluge of phone calls. When the employee spoke in admiration, Hazeline let out a sigh and leered at him.

"...Uh-whew. What will I do, when even you start referring him as a genius? That's just an empty shell of a praise tacked on the guy to make the mass media and the Knights Orders sweat extra hard for a bit. So, what d'ya mean, he's a genius?! Just give it a rest, already. A genius, a greatest, a maestro, a virtuoso – none of those words should mix up with our profession, and neither should we try to use them."

"Eiii... But it's all coming from the community chat room sites first. Right now, even the Alchemy Cafe is in an upheaval. They are asking if they could meet him..." (TL: a Cafe is not a physical coffee shop but an internet forum a la Discord or Reddit. Just your everyday Korean slang term...)

Feeling good in the knowledge that this great sales result would lead to fat bonuses for everyone, the male employee was chatting away in a high-enough spirit, but he calmed right down the moment he came in contact with inexplicably icy gazes. He had stepped onto a potential land mine without realising it. Seeing the sight of Hazeline lightly biting her lower lip with the corner of his eyes, the employee's forehead broke out in drops of sweat.

"Hey, you. Are you still looking at those? Didn't I repeatedly tell you not to waste your time in those d**n gossip sites? Because

that's where the f*cked up bastards hiding behind the veil of anonymity spread around vile, baseless rumours!"

"I'm truly sorry."

The employee apologised in earnest as he knew the Manager deeply hated excuses and hasty explanations.

"Fuu... No need to apologise, instead, just go and do your job. I'll make sure to ask what our genius alchemist's deepest thoughts are or what the plans of his future happen to be."

"Yes!"

The employee left her side and as soon as all signs of people around her were gone for good, Hazeline grabbed her mobile phone. She was acting complete opposite to how she'd been coldly treating her subordinate just now, her demeanor currently full of respect.

- Ring, ring.

She waited for a while, but in the end, all she got was "The person you dialled is busy..."

"He said he's got only a home number so why isn't he picking it up?"

Hazeline cocked an eyebrow in dissatisfaction. She's been calling the number 10 times already, but for some reason she couldn't even get a single answer.

– Ppiiii.... Please leave a message after the tone.

"Hello.... Sir Alchemist? This is Hazeline speaking. I'm the only person who knows this number so please relax. The reason for me calling you this time, is... I was wondering if you'd like to have a work-related dinner with me some time..."

Thanks to Alchemy, his worries over money had been solved. The reserve price for his potion per bottle was \$450K US. On top of

that, he had already sold 2 through the sales commissions, one for over \$620K, and the other for over \$530K.

Even after deducting the sales tax and the Alchemy House's cut, he would still end up pocketing well over \$1.3 million US. This was an amount he'd never even dreamt of having in his life. However, he also couldn't have imagined seeing this amount leave him in one go, either.

The minimum cost of a single, unattached house located the closest to Gangwon Province's Monster field easily exceeded \$1.3 million.

At first, when he heard the amount he just couldn't believe it but after hearing the explanations, he understood the reasoning, just a little.

The house he looked at had a garden the size of 60 pyung, (nearly 200 square metres) an underground bunker equipped with a generator, and had been "insured" with a Knights Order for a "prioritised protection" in case of Monsters' appearance – and to top that all off, the whole building was reinforced with magic engineering to withstand assaults from Monsters of Mid Tier or lower. Hearing about all these points, even Sae-Jin ended up thinking that 1.3 million was on the cheaper side.

He returned to the cave, thinking that spending all that money at once seemed wasteful but he couldn't chance it in an apartment complex with his condition as was, and also the issue with the time reared its ugly head while considering locations further than this, so he decided to settle in that house as soon as the money came in from the completed sale of the potions.

'Well, that's that, but I wonder when I'll evolve again.'

The worries and fears he had certainly lessened with the promised income but couldn't completely be assuaged. The core issue he had, "Can I live on as a Human?" was still there.

Now, he could maintain his Human Form for 100 minutes but really, that didn't exactly qualify as being a human, after all....

'The condition needed for the evolution of the Brown Wolf to the Grey was the Minimum Reputation.'

He evolved together with the message that said about 100 people became aware of his existence. If the rest of the evolution was tied to this concept than that meant he had to deliberately expose his Grey Wolf Form to as many people as possible.

"Fuu..."

However, that was easier said than done; most would try to hunt him down the moment he showed up. Sae-Jin could only sigh out grandly.

But there wouldn't be any changes if he stayed put like this. He'd be able to find even a sliver of hope only when he started moving his body and hit the wall head on.

'Well, let's avoid the Knights for now, and show up only in front of the Hunters.'

"Can we do it?"

"No problem, no problem~ No need to worry so much. It's just a Low Tier creature with a slightly bigger body. Other Hunters are just exaggerating the truth."

One was a Mid Tier, another a low Mid Tier, and lastly, another low Mid Tier. This temporary party of three Hunters consisted of one woman and two men. The woman was full of high spirits and took the lead but the following two men had their shoulders slumped. It was as if they were being dragged along by the woman in front.

"When three Hunters gather, we can bring down any Monster! Isn't that what you guys have said? That's why we became companions, right?" (TL: the last line said something about being step siblings, and it didn't make much sense to me, so companions it is until someone can suggest a better alternative. OG: 의남매 맺었 잖아)

"Hey, that story is already 15 years old. And back then, we were Knights, not Hunters." (TL: this line also greatly confused me. Not sure if this guy was saying they were Knights 15 years ago, which seem quite unlikely as you will see in the next chapter, or the woman's saying about three Hunters the previous paragraph was actually supposed to be three Knights instead and he was pointing that out.)

"Whatever, dude!! Why are you guys acting so down, anyways? If it's a Wolf the size of a tiger, then the remains would fetch quite a nice price and if we find a mid rank Mana Stone in its heart.... you know what that means, right?"

She spoke loudly and happily while making the round coin gesture with her fingers but the dark shadows on the men's faces showed no signs of alleviating.

There was a rumour floating around the Low Tier hunting ground of late. The insidious rumour spoke of a unique Monster prowling the area, the "Unique Grey Wolf."

The number of Hunters witnessing this tiger-sized Grey Wolf had already surpassed high tens, and after earning its nickname "Unique Grey Wolf", the various stories related to this creature had upended the mood of the Hunters Cafe. In fact, the mood had almost reached a point where TV stations might send people to investigate it. (TL: again, the Cafe here is not an actual shop, but an internet forum.)

But quite unlike any other Hunters who would have prioritised their safety first, this woman had dragged these two guys along while raising a fuss.

"I said, no problem, no problem at all~"

The unique Monster, or possibly a mutated one. The term referred to creatures that had went through changes induced by an inborn condition or acquiring something along the line, and began growing in an unnatural way until it became far stronger than all of its peers.

The famous examples included the Sabre-tooth Tigers, the Manticores – a Monster with a Human head, a lion's body, and wings of a bat – and the Dragon Turtles.

These were top tier Monsters that even a party full of High Tier Knights would find difficult to hunt, and these creatures were usually found in the unreachably high and remote parts of the Gangwon's mountains where they would continue their lonely but battle-filled existences.

But to think, there was a unique Monster roaming around freely in the Low Tier hunting ground? This woman was thinking that... this was simply a stupid, unrealistic rumour that even the resident Knights tasked with combating the non-standard Monsters had found utterly laughable.

But the two men thought differently. A Grey Wolf with a size of a tiger. They definitely saw its bright and fearsome eyes. Not personally, of course, but online in the Hunters Cafe.

Its amazing figure standing proudly and staring at the Hunters with the full moon serving as its backdrop, made them stunned at its gorgeousness rather than stunned into fear, made them sense its nobleness rather than its savagery.

"You also saw that, right?"

"I did, but so what? I'm telling you it's not a unique Monster. If it was one, then the Knights would have mobilised by now. And if this b*****d was strong, then why the heck are there so many witnesses? They all would have been dead already."

What she said was true. Unlike the regular, garden variety

Monsters, those labelled as Unique were capable of unleashing special attacks based around magic, which would create equally unique signatures. If that signature was felt, then the resident Knights would be swarming the Low Tier hunting ground, busy patrolling the place high and low.

Plus, the testimonies of the eyewitnesses were a bit weird as well.

They said that the huge Wolf just appeared like a ghost and blocked their paths until the Hunters chose to retreat. They did add that they got scared of its intense eyes and its size, and were too busy running away with tails between their legs, but it meant that this creature didn't come out to hurt people.

"It's just a slightly bigger wolf. And we know that all bigger Monsters have Mana Stones in their hearts. Sure, it should be as strong as it looks, but..... hell, as a Mid Tier Hunter, I didn't bring this bad boy just for a show!!"

She pulled out a handgun from her back pocket. Called KM-758, it was an expensive gun designed to chamber and fire rounds of armour-plated Mana bullets that were especially effective against the beast type Monsters.

"Eh? Where did you get that from?"

"This Mid Tier ranked lady is on another dimension from you guys. I bought it from the cash I earned by participating in hunting with various other parties. With this bad boy, as soon as we find this Wolf, it's as good as a dead meat."

At the entrance of the weapon that was far more trustworthy than her words, the men began to regain some of their former courage.

- Awooooo...!!

However, as soon as they gained some confidence, a powerful fear assaulted them right away. The howl of the wolf piercing the night sky easily swallowed up the budding seeds of courage in their hearts.

"What, what was that?"

Grey Wolves never howled. It was because not only their vocal chords were deformed, the tactic of hiding in the shadows then stealthily assaulting their prey was their most preferred method to hunt and also the reason why these creatures could still live in the Low Tier hunting ground. In other words, they wouldn't deliberately make a noise to spoil their hunting opportunity.

If that's the case, then just what was making that howl?

All three of the Hunters, even the woman who was so full of bravado, ended up sticking very close to each other, their bodies shaking like leaves.

- Awooooo!!

The fear that struck them once more came from a lot closer than before. In the end, all three Hunters fell on their butts while holding hands and their bodies planted against each other's. Even though it was simply a cry of a wolf, they just couldn't recover from the assault of the fear on their senses that made their bodies go numb.

These poor fellas could never ever had posited that there was a magical effect applied in the howl itself....

"I, I, I've already lo, lo, loaded the gun so, no nee, need to wo, worry!"

She grasped the gun with her shaking hands. At the same time, the shivering men recalled with some difficulty the rules of Hunters. They must never surrender to the encroaching fear. The moment they fear the Monster, their lives would be forfeit.

One man brought out a rifle, the other a shotgun. With the sounds of firing pins being cocked, all three of them finished equipping their weapons.

Rustle

They heard the sounds of grasses covered in descending darkness being disturbed. The tightening, dreadful anticipation suppressed the fear and terror, and the three briefly regained their coolheaded Hunter's appearances.

They placed their index fingers on the triggers and took aim towards the direction of the sound.

A minute that felt like 10 passed by, and finally, the Monster revealed its face.

But the Hunters couldn't find the right reaction to this totally unexpected appearance.

- growling

The sight of a green skin, a crude metallic weapon held in one hand, and a bone necklace hung around its neck, stopped their mouths from operating. Was this an Orc Warrior? No, it couldn't be. An Orc Warrior lacked enough self awareness to decorate itself.

The creature that overtly showed off its body and busy sending combative gaze over at the Hunters.... it was an Orc Jaguar. A confrontational individual that possessed strength surpassing an Orc Warrior, it was a low Mid Tier Monster that loved bloody battles. (TL: Yep, the raw definitely said a Jaguar. 오크 재규어)

A low Mid Tier creature. Something that shouldn't even be here in the Low Tier hunting ground.

"...I think, maybe the machine dividing up the Tiers is malfunctioning again."

Because of its natural inclinations towards combat, Orc Jaguars went around searching for enemies to fight, but one of them coming down to the Low Tier hunting ground was extremely rare. There was a machine installed between the low Mid Tier and the Low Tier hunting grounds that was designed to stop Monsters from getting all mixed up.

But it could only lead the Monsters to behave a certain way and was not what one would call a foolproof system, so every now and then, there were "accidents" like these.

"....I'm really sorry. We came to catch a wolf but something f*cking worse showed up instead."

"We ain't dead yet. And didn't I tell you to fix the way you speak? How come for the rest of your life..."

- Ghwoaaaa!!

Their conversation got interrupted by the Orc Jaguar's roar. The three Hunters exchanged several knowing looks. If two of them bought time, then one would be able to survive. So, you wanna live? Nope. What about you? I don't want to.

As expected, the camaraderie built up over the past 15 years was unshakeable. All three of them said no and just grinned. And finally, they decided to just work together. (TL: so this "15 years" bit is here again. I wonder... Maybe I read wrong. Hmm...)

BANG!!

The male Hunter with the rifle took aim at the Orc Jaguar's neck and pulled the trigger first. But the Mana bullet designed for the Low Tier Monsters couldn't pierce the thick skin of the target.

The Monster got enraged by the attack that managed to tickle it and pounced towards the Hunters.

Next was the Hunter with the shotgun.

BLAM!!

The scattering Mana buckshots struck all over the body of the Orc Jaguar. But again, there was no effect.

Finally, only the handgun was left. But she knew. This Orc wasn't a beast type. This gun was them just struggling uselessly....

Rather than her own death, her eyes teared up in apology at the thoughts of dragging her friends to their end here.

And in that moment when she squeezed the trigger of her gun in regret.

Bang!!

The movement of the Orc stopped.

"...?"

The three Hunters stared in panic at the Orc that was literally a stone's throw away from them.

But it wasn't that the Orc had stopped.

Instead, it was busy looking at the right arm that held the crude weapon.

The eyes of the Hunters also followed the line of the sight.

And there was a lone wolf busy chewing on the arm of this Orc, having appeared out of absolutely nowhere.

It was a Grey Wolf.

And it was the very creature the Hunters were looking for, the Grey Wolf with a tiger-sized body.

< 05. A Spirit Beast, the Divine Wolf. (1) > Fin.

Chapter 13: A Spirit Beast, the Divine Wolf (2)

At first, Sae-Jin howled in order to warn them of the incoming danger. There was an Orc Jaguar heading towards the three Hunters, after all.

Unfortunately, it seemed there was an unexpected effect of a skill attached to his howl.

- ►[Condition Complete: Drove a minimum of one person to the state of terror with the wolf's howl] Passive Skill "Howling" acquired.
- While in the Wolf Form, the host can affect the emotional state of targeted individuals with his Howling. Example: Fear, Terror, Mysteriousness, etc.

'What the hell...'

Instead of running away, the Hunters that heard his cry fell on their asses after their legs gave up on them. And the Orc Jaguar was slowly approaching those poor suckers.

A short time later the Hunters and the Orc clashed. The trio had fallen into a state of panic but somehow recovered just in time and started firing their guns.

- Blam!!

Sae-Jin dashed towards the scene as he listened to the sound of the gunshot. He just couldn't sit back and watch, knowing that he was partially responsible for this mess, even though he didn't plan things to happen this way.

Fortunately, Sae-Jin arrived in the nick of time. Moving fast enough to cause a storm of winds, the wolf opened wide its maws and bit down hard on the right arm of the Orc Jaguar.

Kwajeek.

But what he got was a sensation of blockage, the lack of the satisfying penetration. It was not possible even for the incredible biting strength of a Grey Wolf to pierce the tough and thick skin of an Orc Jaguar. When the Orc looked at his way indifferently, Sae-Jin couldn't help but busily move his eyes and take a glance at the creature.

"———!!"

The Orc roared in irritation and swung its arm hard, throwing Sae-Jin off it. He quickly regained his footing after being thrown off and took some distance, but the explosive speed of the Orc Jaguar was much faster than his expectations. As befitting of the moniker, "Jaguar". Its speed didn't lose out to that of a Grey Wolf at all.

It seemed to take only a couple of steps, but it had arrived at Sae-Jin's location and slammed down its weapon at him.

Khoong!!!

Sae-Jin just about dodged the strike by twisting his body.

"Ghuoaar!!"

Annoyed by the agile movement of the Wolf, the Orc Jaguar began pounding away like crazy with its blunt weapon. The accuracy was pretty d**n low but the destructive power behind each strike was no laughing matter. Sae-Jin twisted around like a snake and avoided the crazed attacks. But the ground below could not withstand the aimless poundings and became overturned like a crop field ready for seeds to be planted, while numerous debris – pebbles, soil, weeds – flew up in the air.

Meanwhile, the three stooges Hunters sat there and stared at this

scene in a total daze. It was like they were stuck inside a dream. It had to be a dream since this event they were seeing couldn't be reality, as the Low Tier Monster Grey Wolf was fighting tooth and nail with an Orc Jaguar that was considered to be one of the strongest even in the low Mid Tier rankings.

As they watched the proceedings in a daze, the woman suddenly raised her gun towards the battle.

"Hey, hey, what are you doing?"

One of the men panicked and tried to stop her. The other guy did the same. The two of them thought that instead of trying to agitate the two Monsters, it would be a far smarter choice to escape during this time of reprieve.

"An Orc Jaguar is known as an obsessive Monster. It's got a good nose too, and it will never let a prey it found escape like that. Dunno if that Wolf intervened in order to buy us time to run, but it's the correct choice to help it out right now."

What if the wolf targets us next after the Orc Jaguar is dead?! The male Hunter couldn't spit his words out. If it weren't for that wolf, they would have died already, and if that wolf couldn't defeat the Orc, then they would still die anyway.

"Aim mainly at the eyes, between the eyebrows, mouth, and under the arm."

They had received the ranks of low Mid and Mid Tier at the age of 23, meaning all three of them had enough skills to roll around in this rough world by themselves. They quickly reloaded their guns and took aim at the battle of a Wolf and an Orc. Even though the Orc exposed a lot of openings because of its lack of palpable intelligence, all of them proved to be useless in the end. The Hunters had to aim at those weak spots where there wasn't much covering of thick skin, or where there weren't any to begin with.

Kwaaaahng!!

The Orc pounded hard once more, but it was yet another miss. It ended up destroying the poor ground again, so it widened its eyes in anger and searched for the slippery Wolf.

And when it stopped its movement for a brief moment, an oval shaped object with a pointy tip sliced past the wind and and struck one of the Orc's eyes.

"Kuoarrrrr!!"

It was a Mana bullet. As the bullet that was densely infused with Mana came in contact with the Orc's retina, it exploded – and the hulking creature spouted blood as it stumbled backwards just a little.

BlamBlamBlam!!

As the flurry of bullets flew at it aiming for the weak spots, the Orc raised its arm and easily swatted them away.

With one of its eyes gone, the focus of the Orc Jaguar's fury switched its target from the Wolf to the three Hunters. Its anger boiled so much that it'd pounce on the three humans at any moment.

"It's coming!! Separate, now!!"

When the Orc unwisely started moving towards the Hunters while ignoring the Wolf, Sae-Jin's chance had come.

He activated the skill Warrior of Reversal.

Almost immediately, his muscles grew at an incredible speed and vitality filled his body. When the fighting spirit that could not be doused burned powerfully inside him, Sae-Jin decided to relieve this feeling with him ripping out the back of the Orc's neck.

The Wolf, with its body completely transformed, assaulted the back of the Orc like a raging, crashing storm wave.

He only needed two full steps. Wind gathered below his paws and using the propulsion from them, he charged into the Orc's back.

Kwajeek.

Sae-Jin finally succeeded in piercing through the skin. But, it still wasn't a fatal enough wound. So, he shook his head around in order to further tear open a larger chunk of the wound.

"Khoarrrr!!"

The Orc screamed in pain and tried to pry the Wolf off from its back. But Sae-Jin's temporarily enhanced jaw strength could ignore the creature's desperate shakings. While biting deeper into the neck of the Orc, he sent out signals with his eyes at the Hunters. It was their turn to shine, now.

"...*breathing heavily*..."

The woman Hunter aimed the handgun with her imperceptibly trembling hands. The target was the Orc's left eye.

The Orc raged around powerfully, but she didn't hesitate one bit as she squeezed the trigger.

The steel-encased Mana bullet drew a clear trajectory as it flew towards the Orc. Literally, it was clear to see. Its speed wasn't of a regular bullet. As if it was a flower petal blowing around in the wind, the Mana bullet slowly approached the Orc.

It was a built-in feature of this high priced firearm designed to maximise accuracy.

The damage from the speed of the bullet would lessen but since it was going to explode once entering the target, the design of a steel-encased Mana bullet was also focused solely on achieving high accuracy.

She manipulated her Mana and guided the trajectory and the direction of the bullet in real time. The bullet constantly changed its aim as the Orc violently struggled until finally, it struck the creature's eye.

A small explosion followed right after. A fountain of blood

poured out from the Orc's eye.

"Whew."

It was a bull's eye. She breathed out a sigh of relief.

Even though the Orc had become completely blind, the Wolf remained biting into the neck for a few more seconds before separating from the creature.

"Khwo-kheu-"

The back of the neck chewed out by the Wolf looked as if it'd split apart in any second, and from the eyes damaged by the bullets blood poured out like a fountain. The Orc Jaguar let out a weird whimper and threw its two arms around, but even that didn't last long.

"___"

The creature fell on top of the grass and stopped moving shortly thereafter.

"Haah...."

When the battle ended, the three Hunters fell on their asses again as the strength abandoned their legs.

Sae-Jin was breathing heavily as he spat out the blood pooled in his mouth. And before long, a new message window popped into his view.

「Condition Cleared: A Cooperative Hunting.」

- Succeeded in a cooperative hunting with at least the minimum of 1 Human.
- It's now possible to change into the Ebony Wolf Form instead of a Grey Wolf. All Stats related to the Forms will be adjusted accordingly.
- The skill "The Scent of a Wolf" will apply even while in Human Form.

- ▶ Passive skill, "The Scent of a Wolf" [Level: F]
- The strong odour of the Ebony Wolf. Depending on the gender, race, characteristics and tendencies, the effects will vary.
 - This skill will also remain active during the Human Form.

It was a joyous message no matter how many times he looked at it. But just like before, he couldn't shout out in happiness as the timing proved to be a bit wrong as well.

"...Hey, hey!! Look at that!!"

The woman Hunter suddenly raised a ruckus as she began pointing at Sae-Jin.

Actually, he had no idea what the process of his evolution looked like. All he could derive from the dazed, mouths-wide-open appearances of the three Hunters were that, maybe, it must have been rather mysterious or somewhat bizarre to look at.

Sae-Jin remained standing proudly for a bit and gazed at them, before rapidly dashing away.

And the only ones left behind were the three dazed Hunters still acting like they were swimming inside a dream.

"Hey, did you see that?"

"Yup."

"Its fur changed while brightly shining and all that, right?"

"....Yup."

When the Wolf's body was enveloped in the mysterious azure light, the previously grey coat became dyed in jet black colour. This was a kind of an incredibly rare event that couldn't be seen again even in a dream.

It was at night. With a full moon looming large, a huge crowd of people had camped in the the Monster field's Low Tier hunting ground. But it wasn't just people only. There were also numerous trucks, antennae, cameras and mics that couldn't normally be seen in a place like this; in other words, they were news crews and their accompanying vehicles. Under the curious gazes of one or two onlookers, the reporters were all in the midst of busy reporting on something while being protected by the Knights.

"....Can you tell me what is going on here?"

Sae-Jin cautiously approached one of the Knights on duty and asked. He assumed the Human Form and ran all the way out here, after suddenly catching the whiff of so many people and getting surprised by that.

"It's to film a report. You probably have heard of the rumour, too, right? They say it's a Spirit Beast or something... Obviously it's all nonsense. But nowadays, what with folks being emotionally dried up and all, stuff like this.... Tsk, tsk."

The Knight who was normally stationed around these parts clicked his tongue in annoyance as if he didn't like getting called out in the middle of the night.

There was this hot new story tossing around on the Internet as well as on various newspapers. It was about a certain Grey Wolf that morphed into an Ebony Wolf – a story of a Spirit Beast. This story came to life after three Hunters gave a clear, concise eyewitness testimony as well as uploading the photos of the Orc Jaguar's remains to the Hunters Cafe.

The Hunters all spoke of the event where, after the Grey Wolf aided them in defeating the Orc Jaguar, its body suddenly became dyed in the azure light, then all of its fur turned black in colour.

The eyewitnesses guessed that this wolf was one of those growthtype Monsters, but as the story spread out like a wildfire, people, including the so-called experts, concluded from the creature's actions that it must be a Spirit Beast instead. The reason was simple. Monsters tried to devour humans, but this particular wolf helped them out. And after the part about its fur changing colours were emphasized, a certain persuasive speculation gained traction where people wondered if this wolf was the same one that saved the Hunter Kim Tae-Jo way back then.

"What will happen if this wolf shows up?"

Sae-Jin carefully asked again.

"Probably nothing more than getting shot at by the cameras."

"Huh... So it's not going to get hunted down?"

"Fuhut. Hey, Mister Diligent Hunter, I get your dedication to your work, but if we try anything here, the public will crucify all of us."

"Ah."

"But man, between us, aren't these news reporter people dumb as hell? I mean, a wolf is a very skittish creature, so why raise so much fuss as a group....?"

The Knight stopped talking and looked around. The Hunter he was talking to just now had suddenly vanished.

"Where did he go?"

He just dropped the matter and switched his focus back to the guarding duty.

5 minutes passed, and then 10 minutes flowed by.

The original aim was to film the approximate location where the Spirit Beast had appeared while expecting nothing much to happen, so when that was all done, the reporters got ready to pack up and leave.

But it was at this very moment.

- Awooooo...!!

A cry of a wolf resounded loudly in the air. The cameraman busy loading the van with the equipment and the lady reporter climbing aboard the passenger seat all stopped in utter shock and quickly turned their heads towards the origin of that sound.

And they saw a lone wolf, framed by the full moon on its back atop the nearby mountain peak, gazing back at them. The dignified stance that couldn't have possibly belonged to a wolf, the majestic body overflowing with confidence. The black fur coat that seemed to shine softly under the moonlight, and a pair of golden eyes that burned brightly. And finally, a mysterious howl that could shake their souls.

""

A wolf was not a tiger, but everyone gathered here could definitely feel the same thing. The wolf that was proudly surveying the ground here was definitely the "Sangun". (TL: it's a Hanja word that means a few things – one, meaning the guardian of the mountains, two, literally a fierce tiger, and the MC from a Naver webtoon, Brother Tiger Bar Khan. I thought the author meant the first two, so left as is.)

"....Hey, wake up!! Start filming already!!"

The dazed members of the press began to move in a hurry. They hefted the cameras and began hunting for the best angle to capture the view of that proud creature.

"Huh..."

The Knight who sneered in contempt just now was left speechless as he stared at the distant wolf. He scoffed and said there was no such thing as a Spirit Beast. But even he couldn't call that creature a Monster. Certainly, not after seeing this unexplainable aura of divinity wrapped around the Wolf.

"!!"

"H, hey!!"

"What the hell?!"

There was a sudden collective cry of shock. Not content with just the appearance alone, there were several blue coloured blobs of Mana rising all around the wolf like the ghostly flames of the Underworld.

"D, d, did you get that?? Hey, I said, did you film that sh*t?!"

It'd be a huge scoop if captured on film. A guy that looked like a producer or a director yelled loudly while making a shocked expression. At this shout, the cameraman nodded his still-dazed face but at the same time...

"Hey, where did it go?!"

As if the previous event was nothing but a passing dream, the Wolf's presence had disappeared completely.

< A Spirit Beast, the Divine Wolf (2) > Fin.

Chapter 14: A Spirit Beast, the Divine Wolf (3)

- What the!! Hey, did you get that? Oii!! I said, did you film that sh*t?!

The loud shouts of the TV crew could be heard.

- Were you able to witness that? Around the wolf, several strange ghost lights have started appearing one by one, as if the creature can manipulate Mana... huh?

Next, it was the turn of the reporter to shout out aloud beyond the scope of the camera lens.

But not minding that, the wolf turned around and lightly hopped down from the mountain top. The camera hurriedly chased after it, but by then, it was gone without a trace.

"Hmm...."

Hazeline frowned slightly as she watched the hologram display projected from her mobile phone.

A Spirit Beast, the divine creature. A being of mystery that a person may or may not get to see even once in his or her entire lifetime.

When she was 25, she got to see a Spirit Beast, the "Black Turtle". Even though it was massive, because of its laid back nature, it didn't enjoy moving around too much. Found originally in Eastern China, it was a creature that would have lived its days in a lazy stupor and barely moving one of its legs, but in the end it was murdered because of a child of some wealthy personage from the Middle East who suffered from a deadly illness.

The child suffered from the Mana Overflow. To cure this worst kind of Mana-related inflictions that couldn't be cured by any known potion to man and subjected its sufferers to a hellish torment before killing them, the Black Turtle that had lived for 400 years or more in various worlds out there was turned into a medical ingredient in a single day.

knock knock

The sound of knocking on the door brought Hazeline back to the present from the reminiscence of the past and she took a glance at the watch to confirm the time. It was now 11:50. It was also the time for the appointment with that alchemist after finally getting one phone call through to him.

"Please come in."

The figure entering through the gap between the smoothly opening doors was a robe-wearing man.

"Welcome back."

"Yes, it's good to see you again."

The two shared a handshake and sat down on their seats while gazing at each other.

"Have you been well? You...."

Hazeline tilted her head in confusion. Something was different about him.... Soon, she was able to figure what that difference was after she sniffed the air.

"I see you bought a perfume..."

The subtle yet pleasant scent coming off of Sae-Jin tickled her nose. Not too light, nor too gaudy, the odour settled in the air rather wonderfully. She ended up unconsciously closing her eyes and savoured this scent before regaining her senses, and made a fake cough.

"Heuhm. It's nice. If it's not much trouble, can I inquire as to where you purchased this perfume?"

Hazeline possessed a very sensitive nose making her very interested and knowledgeable towards the topic of perfumes. It'd

be difficult for her to ignore this wonderful new scent at all. She just had to have it ready in her home or she'd never be satisfied.

"I didn't use one. It's all natural."

Sae-Jin just smiled and shook his head.

Hazeline's brows wiggled a tiny bit. There definitely wasn't a scent like this the first time they met. At the time, he had no body odour. So why was he trying to sell such an unconvincing lie?

"Ah, is that so~ You have a... very nice natural odour."

But Hazeline could only perform the "Capitalist Smile" for now. As he currently held all the cards in this transaction, she just could not afford to make him unhappy. (TL: this is the second time I encountered the phrase 갑을관계 which as far as I know there isn't a direct translation available. So ended up changing it to mean roughly the same thing. Sorry.)

"Ah, yes. Thank you."

Sae-Jin swallowed his saliva while feeling complicated, and replied to her. He could pretty much tell what she was thinking right now. She probably thought that he was lying through his teeth. But he was helpless to fix this misunderstanding. The Scent of a Wolf was a passive skill that couldn't be switched on and off at will.

"Haha, well then, is it okay if we end the prologue here?"

When Sae-Jin nodded in agreement, Hazeline pulled out a paper from one of the drawers in the desk. It was a regular A4 paper with nothing on it.

"This is?"

"As I've mentioned over the phone yesterday..."

Hazeline spoke as she handed over a pen. On a side note, it was only yesterday that Sae-Jin belatedly realised he could actually receive phone calls directed to his home via his bracelet TV.

"...Please write down all the ingredients you'd like to acquire. We'll source them for you. As long as it's not something like a heart of a person or a fang of a Sabre-tooth Tiger, it's possible to procure them within a month. One of the roles the Alchemy Houses perform is the circulation of medical ingredients, you know. Ah, you don't have to feel burdened about this. It's not a free service so you'll have to purchase them from us. But we'll be able to sell you at cost. It'll probably be about half of what you'd pay for in the open market."

"Oh, right. Thank you."

Sae-Jin picked up the pen and thought hard about what to write when his eyes inadvertently caught the images floating up from the hologram display above her desk.

It was the scene of the Ebony Wolf framed by a full moon, the one where he deliberately showed up for the TV cameras as a... bit of a service.

At the time, it was one of those nights that made his emotions go a bit hot headed, so he ended up creating this mess.... but now that he got to see his actions in the broad daylight, his face got all reddened up.

"Ah, Spirit Beasts are a no-go."

Misunderstanding the reasons for his gazes, Hazeline raised her index finger and waved it side to side while making a serious face.

"Hunting down a Spirit Beast is morally and legally prohibited, you see. We have no idea if the Spirit Beast has a direct influence in the area it resides in. There might be a big disaster like a landslide occurring if we hunted down that Wolf."

That was what happened back when the Black Turtle was killed. As soon as it died, the Mana dwelling deep within the ocean floor that lost the focal point overflowed and resulted in a massive tsunami wave sweeping up the entire Eastern Seaboard of China.

"Right. No, definitely not. We should never kill such a cool wolf."

He swallowed the rising laughter back down and genially spoke in a natural manner. While obviously unaware of Kim Sae-Jin being that very wolf, Hazeline looked at the display and continued with her speech.

"Yes, well. It is a cool creature, what with its somewhat dependable appearance, and also its personality of helping people out, too. But most of all, I love those eyes that resemble the full moon. It's really understandable why all the girls are going crazy in the social networking sites nowadays. Honestly, even I shared a couple of posts on the Profile Book. Oh, by any chance, do you also do Profile Book?"

(TL: 프로필북 literally profile book. After a short Googling, I think it generally means Facebook-ing, twitting and posting social media comments. At least, that was the impression I got. Left as is.)

"Heuheup... No, no. I don't do social media."

Seeing Hazeline giggle like that, even Sae-Jin ended up leaking out a mysterious smile. She looked at him with eyes full of questions but he pretended that nothing was wrong and started writing down on the paper.

A Goblin's Kindness was impossible without the fangs of the Sabre-tooth Tiger, so he wrote down ingredients for other potions. He even thought of their names in advance. The potion to strengthen the stats of the drinker would be called "A Goblin's Rage", and, and....

"If you can find these, I'll be grateful."

When he handed over the paper, she studied every word in detail, even though she was acting disinterested by the contents. It was a normal list of ingredients that didn't seem to differ from what other alchemists would have asked for.

"Alright. As soon as we procure them, I'll give you a call. Oh,

and... if it's okay with you, will you be partnering us on your next batch of potions as well...?"

"Yes, let's."

Sae-Jin spoke without a hint of hesitation. In all honesty, he couldn't really go anywhere else anyway, because he could only remain as a human for 2 hours a day.

"Wah, Really? You truly are wonderfully decisive, sir. Normally, other alchemists would be reluctant to choose but Sir Alchemist doesn't..."

"It's Kim Sae-Jin."

He told her while studying her eyes. He could see the surprise in her jewel-like eyes at his sudden self introduction.

"And my race is human."

Sae-Jin reached out with his hand. Hazeline stared at the hand for a moment in a daze, before breaking out in a smile and shaking it.

"Yes, Sir Alchemist Kim Sae-Jin. I'll do my utmost best to make sure you won't regret choosing Yoseon Alchemy House."

As the handshake ended, the two stood up from their seats.

"It's just about lunch time, but have you eaten yet?"

"Yes, I have already."

"If that's the case, why don't we, together... eh?"

At Sae-Jin's reply, Hazeline tilted her head in confusion, wondering if she'd heard wrong.

An Elf like her was not at all accustomed with rejections such as this. And from a man, no less.... it was obviously the first time in her life. Even if it was a gentle no.

"I already had lunch."

"But, but it's only now 12?!"

"Ah, I usually eat my meals a bit early. My apologies."

Of course, he had his own unfortunate reasons for doing this, but the deeply shocked Hazeline could only nod her head after blinking repeatedly in disbelief for a while.

"Ah, yes, well, yes, well.... Of course.... Of course it is, of course it has to be...."

"Yes. Well, when we have the time later. Then, please excuse me."

His last words landed the decisive blow.

Hazeline's mouth hung loose. She just could not figure out this situation no matter what. He said when we have the time later, but she was the one saying that, usually. She was not the one on the receiving end. It was a kind of unwelcome shock to her system that she could never, ever grow to understand.

She watched the back of Sae-Jin leaving her office in a daze and totally crumbled into her seats right after.

""

And she remained in that position for 10 minutes, looking like as if her soul had been sucked out.

sniff, sniff

By sheer accident, she ended up smelling the air around her. The scent was gone now. She felt a bit regretful.

sniff, sniff

She thought that she had become a Soo-in (beast man) but it really could not be helped.

There was a trace of that scent lingering inside her nose, making her miss it even more now. Even though it had been only 10 minutes.

"I should've just asked..."

If it could make someone miss another with only its scent, then it was without a doubt, an excellent perfume.

If it was at this level, then she should have found out what it was even at the risk of annoying him. She muttered slowly, her face full of regret.

She continued to sniff the air for a while, before finding herself browsing the Internet for men's perfumes.

Sae-Jin could often overhear people talking about the Spirit Wolf Beast everywhere as he walked. Students, Knights, even magicians – it seemed like every resident living near or on Gangwon Province had talked about the wolf at least once. And more flesh was getting added to the story of the Spirit Wolf Beast, just like that.

Since now he could remain a bit longer as a Human, Sae-Jin chose to walk into the Monster field the official way, through the Reception area by the entrance. This was the place where the Hunters and Knights could take a short respite before going on a hunt or after completing it.

It wasn't originally a quiet place to begin with, but now, with the numerous reporters mixed in, trying to get more stories on the Spirit Beast, it was a lot more chaotic than usual.

"Ah, now that I think about it, that thing's cry was like, there's a Monster up ahead, so don't go~ That's what that meant, right? It was a real smart thing to turn back then, after feeling uneasy of that howl."

"Does that mean you Mister Hunter also got to see this Spirit Wolf Beast?"

"....Eh? Ah~ well, no. But, but, I really did hear it with these two ears of mine, I did!! It was going Awoooo and everything. Ya also know well, that wolves in the Monster field never cry, right? Seriously, when I was thinking, did I go in too deep~? This wolf

cries out and I got so surprised, I just bolted right outta there."

"Does that mean, this Spirit Wolf Beast has helped people out before?"

"Yep, that's right. I'm telling ya right now, ya really can't see a cleverer creature than that guy. Oi!! That man over there, that's the Hunter who got help from that Brown Wolf – hey, hey Mister Kim Tae-Jo!! Come over here. This reporter wants to ask ya something..."

Sae-Jin smiled in satisfaction while hearing all these conversations.

To him, it looked like the momentum of the story would continue to gather for a while longer as those people wanting some attention ended up telling tall tales and outright lies.

< 05. A Spirit Beast, the Mystical Wolf (3) > Fin.

Chapter 15: The Mana Stone of a Beast (1)

On top of the cold stone floor, Sae-Jin opened his eyes. He could see Hunters in the far away forest, while the noisy chirping of birds disorientated him. A Wolf could look a little further away, and hear a little bit more.

He got up from the spot, his four black legs moved.

Before he knew it, it felt like he had completely adapted to using four legs instead of two. Because of this, a whole bunch of swear words suddenly rushed out of his mouth.

The amount of time available for the Human Form was 2 hours a day. If he could be a human for only 2 hours then maybe he wasn't a human anymore.

At the growing disquiet, he got straight up and changed into his Human Form.

Sae-Jin stared at his legs with his own two eyes, then touched his face with his own two hands. They were all exact the same as before. He was truly relieved. Tears welled up at the corners of his eyes.

It was especially difficult in the mornings after nights of sleep.

He always suspected if the him now was stuck inside of a dream. Often times, he wished he was, as a dream would've been better.

It was very painful living as a Monster. The taste of blood and flesh was still stuck between his teeth, the sensation of ripping away lives whole with a mace – he just couldn't get used to them. If anything, all those things just served to wear him down to his bones.

```
"....*sigh*...."
```

Sae-Jin let out a deep sigh. But his tight chest and ominous feelings wouldn't just go away like that.

And the unusually drab, grey morning sky was making him feel even more depressed than before.

At least to somehow cheer himself up, he switched on the micro TV.

With a soft whirr, a hologram projection spread its light on a wall of the cave.

"Pant, pant, pant..."

An Orc Jaguar was on the run from something.

A creature like the Orc Jaguar possessing such a deep desire for battle and victory was on the run? That was simply nonsensical. But right now, this very Orc was beset with terror even from the sound of rustling grass behind it.

The smell of a wolf, the odour of a predator, was making this once-brave Orc scared out of its wits.

The Orc's eyes hurriedly searched behind its back. It couldn't see anything back there. But that accursed smell was still lingering there. So the Orc spared no efforts and put strength in its legs to run away.

- Awooooo!!

A Howling dipped in magical power tore through the sky and grabbed hold of this fleeing Orc's legs. It felt like all the muscles on its body were going numb from the sheer terror.

The Orc intuitively sensed the encroaching death and as it turned its head around... a huge shadow of a jet-black wolf rapidly descended down on it.

"Kwek-"

With its throat grabbed tight, the Orc couldn't even let out any particular scream, only a small whimper, before its life was snuffed out.

"Khrnng."

After clearing its nose, the wolf pierced into the heart of the Orc with its razor-sharp claw. When the hard tip of the claw penetrated past the soft tissues of the heart and touched something solid, the wolf closed his eyes.

Then, something mysterious happened.

An azure aura slowly rose up like a smoldering veil and began covering the Wolf from the claw buried in the heart of the dead Orc to the rest of its black body in a thin, nearly imperceptible layer. This blue light lingered around for a moment before entering the creature, causing him to open his eyes in satisfaction.

[You have absorbed the Low Grade Mana Stone of an Orc Jaguar.]

- Physical Strength and Endurance rise by 0.5.
- Agility rises by 0.2.
- Energy Manipulation rises by 0.05.
- If ?? more Stones are absorbed, the native skill of the Orc Jaguar can be acquired.

'That's quite a lot. Was it because I got an Orc Jaguar, even though it was still a juvenile?'

Sae-Jin, now in his Ebony Wolf Form, grinned slyly.

He discovered this way of utilising Mana Stones rather coincidentally. It truly was through a completely lucky chance.

Around 10 days ago, Sae-Jin watched a documentary on his TV inside the cave. And in this particular documentary, the makers were explaining why the predatory Monsters, such as a Troll in Ravenous State or a Two-Headed Ogre, became stronger after eating other Monsters.

At the end of the programme, the experts concluded that these Monsters possessed special digestive system that could absorb Mana Stones. Those words ended up rousing his curiosity, so Sae-Jin picked up a lowest grade Mana Stone he planned to sell later on and promptly swallowed it.

Just like that, an alert window popped up into view at the same time.

[Condition Complete: Absorb a Mana Stone.]

- ► The Passive Skill "A Growth Type Monster" has been acquired. [Skill Proficiency Level: F]
- When coming in contact with the Mana Stone of a Monster, the host can now absorb a minute percentage of its abilities.
- A greater percentage of the Monster's abilities shall be absorbed when the Skill Proficiency Level increases.

He felt like he just hit the jackpot. Sae-Jin then quickly went and ate all 10 Mana Stones stored in the cave. All Stats ended up rising by around 6, but unfortunately, the most important one of them all, the Energy Manipulation, only rose by a paltry 0.6. But he wasn't disappointed at all. He did find a new way to increase that important stat, that was why.

He then really focused on hunting afterwards. He would kill at least 7 to 8 Monsters in a day and absorbed their Mana Stones.

The stronger the Monster, the higher his Stats rose; as to which Stat rose when, that depended on the Monsters he hunted down. Following the traits of Monsters, if it was an Orc, then his Physical Strength increased; if it was a Wolf, then his Agility rose; if it was a Goblin, then the increase centered around Mana Affinity and Magic Strength.

After focusing solely on hunting for 10 days...

► Status

[Physical Strength 49]

[Endurance 48]

```
[Agility 63][Energy Manipulation 14][Mana Affinity 9][Magic Strength 9][Luck 8]
```

[*Ebony Wolf: Strength and Defense increase by 26, Agility increases by 40. During the Human Form, the effects will be reduced by ½.]

Finally, Sae-Jin grew strong enough to easily bring down an Orc Jaguar. Of course, it wasn't a fully grown individual but just a runt young enough to call it an "Orc Student", but still.

'All that's left to do is to evolve...'

Sae-Jin sighed out. It came out as a prreung~ from the maws of the wolf.

As far as he knew, or for that matter the rest of the world, the Ebony Wolves were the strongest species of the wolf type Monster in the Monster field.

In other words, if he could evolve just one more time, he could very well become either a Lycanthrope, or a Werewolf.

On a side note, the differences between a Lycanthrope and a Werewolf were quite clear to see, up to a point.

A Werewolf was purely a beast. However, a Lycanthrope was considered a person, just like Vampires, Humans, Soo-ins, and Elves.

A Werewolf possessed a skill to morph into a Human, but in the end, its nature was still that of a vicious beast.

A Lycanthrope possessed a skill to change into a wolf-man, but at its core, it was a human being.

Looking at things this way, then Sae-Jin was closer to being a

Werewolf rather than a Lycanthrope. That was because of his Trait changing his species from Human to Monster.

But a Werewolf was incomparably weaker than a Lycanthrope. One could understand this point when seeing that, while the latter became a legend, the former remained at the level of a rare Monster.

But he didn't really care which one he'd evolve into.

As long as he could spend the day as Human while not worrying about that damnable time limit....

Even with just that, he'd be happy enough.

*

Tadahk, tadahk.

While making similar noises to what a puppy would make when running on a stone surface, Sae-Jin returned to his cave.

Changing back to the Human Form, he brought out the micro TV, placed it on a nice spot and lied down on the stone bed.

Lately, this was his only method of relaxation. After finishing the hunt, he'd watch TV for the rest of the day with his tired and aching body.

Since this was the only Human-like "hobby" he could do, he kept on watching it until bedtime even if all of the programmes on were extremely boring.

– Today afternoon, the President...

This wasn't interesting, so he changed the channel.

- Haaa.... Seriously, isn't there any talented people in the Gaebyuk Knights Order? Can't you even properly cook rice?
 - I-I'm sorry. I'm not used to doing this...

A programme about trying to survive on some remote island somewhere, came on. Famed for his icy-good looks, the superstar Yi Seon-Jae, who didn't look at all his age of mid-40s, was busy berating a Mid-Tier Knight named Kim Si-Eol. (TL: the author literally said it was a programme about making three meals a day on a remote island....)

- But hey, what does a Knights Order do nowadays? Haven't we not have an incident of Monsters raiding cities for the past 5 years?
- Yes, well. That's true. We... are focusing on clearing out the Fissures.
- Is that so? But seeing how you have come all the way out here, you probably didn't have much to do in the first place.

The chemistry between stupid-faced Kim Si-Eol who couldn't do anything properly and Yi Seon-Jae who continued to score with barbed comments was fun to watch. Sae-Jin even giggled at several moments, too.

'.....I wonder, can I also make an appearance on TV?'

A strange thought suddenly bloomed in Sae-Jin's head as he continued to watch the TV and chuckle.

No matter how effed up it was, he still received a superpower, so such a thought inevitably had to spring up in his mind, seeing that he lived as an orphan with no hope and prospects for 21 years of his life. And that thought, was about being loved by many people out there.

Nowadays, the gap between a Hunter or a Knight, and that of a celebrity was quite small. There were even TV shows dedicated to Hunters and Knights only, so it was possible to become famous by killing enough Monsters to raise one's rank to a Mid-Tier if one was a Knight, or High-Tier if one was a Hunter.

'As if...'

Not too long after, Sae-Jin returned to reality and vigorously shook his head to disperse the unrealistic dream out of his mind. And then, he changed the channel right away.

- 3 o'clock this afternoon, a Werewolf was witnessed coming out from a Fissure in Gangbukgu.

"Khrreung!!"

Sae-Jin's body shot up from the bed the moment he heard the news.

– Slightly resembling the legendary Lycanthrope, but quite different in nature, the Werewolf is a rare Monster that hadn't been seen for past 30 years. After cleaning up the Fissure in Gangbukgu, the Raven Knights Order has announced plans to craft equipment from the remains of the Werewolf, as well as to auction off the recovered Mana Stone.

"Ghrrrung!!"

As soon as he heard the words Mana Stone, Sae-Jin nearly pounced into the hologram projection.

- The auction containing the Werewolf's Mana Stone as well as other loot recovered from the Fissure will be held at Hyunwol Auction House located on the island of Sebit next week Tuesday, 1 PM. The Werewolf's Mana Stone has been rated at only a upper Mid Grade, but its selling price is expected to be, at minimum, \$1.76 million US, to the maximum of \$3.5 million US, due to a high number of collectors desiring this rare item.

"NOOO!! Why the f*ck is it so expensive?!"

Sae-Jin became so emotional, he inadvertently changed back to the Human Form and yelled out loudly. (TL: ??? I thought the dude was in the Human Form already while watching the telly. Huh. Must've changed to the wolf because of the time limit.)

Money!! Money!!

Truly out of the blue, he found himself needing a lot of money.

Of course, the chances were, he'd go through no changes whatsoever even after absorbing that Mana Stone. But there was a

possibility. Even if it was minute, for Sae-Jin who was in the deepest bowels of despair it was worth betting everything he had.

"MONEY!!"

He yelled out even louder and stood up from his position.

Sae-Jin anxiously paced around the interior of the cave for 10 minutes while biting his fingernails. The voice of the anchor continued to reverberate in his head.

The expected price of \$1.76 million minimum, the maximum of \$3.5 million...

The expected price of \$1.76 million minimum, the maximum of \$3.5 million... (TL: Yes, the same line is repeated in the raw.)

'I don't have enough money.'

Sae-Jin bit his lower lip, hard.

Then, he spotted the micro TV's call function.

There was only one number showing up in the list of the recent calls – Hazeline.

They only saw each other twice now. And the amount he needed to borrow was, at least, \$1.76 million.

Any sane person would know not to make that call.

But for a guy with a pair of bloodshot eyes and his thoughts stuck in despair, such a thing as sanity had imploded a long time ago.

- ring, ring

His breathing became harsher every time there was a ring.

He didn't want to miss this opportunity. The Werewolf's Mana Stone – from a rare Monster that had not been seen in the past 30 years. If he missed this chance, then there may never be a next time for him.

- "Hello, this is the Manager of Yoseon Alchemy House...."

"Miss Hazeline!! This is Kim Sae-Jin speaking!!"

Sae-Jin hurriedly shouted out her name in an urgent voice, causing Hazeline to answer in panic.

- "Ah, hello, Sir Kim Sae-Jin. Is there something wrong?"

"I need to apologise to you beforehand, but may I ask you for an important but selfish favour?"

- "Y-yes? Why so suddenly... ah, yes, it's possible. If it's you, Sir Alchemist."

Hazeline made a calm reply. She was probably thinking that it couldn't be something big.

Or, even if it truly wasn't something big as she suspected, she could have figured that having Sae-Jin in her debt may prove beneficial in the further development of their business relationship....

"Can you borrow me some money? I will definitely, definitely, without a doubt, work hard and repay you with my potions."

It just so happened to be that she was right.

And he dearly wished to get into an enormous debt with Hazeline.

- "....Eh?"

A short sound of incredulous shock leaked out from the receiver of the phone.

< The Mana Stone of a Beast (1) >

Chapter 16: The Mana Stone of a Beast (2)

"What are you talking about, out of the blue...? First, please calm down, take a deep breath, and then talk to me. I'm not going anywhere."

Hazeline carefully admonished him. She wasn't sure of what happened, but the alchemist seemed to be in a lot of hurry and was thirsty for something, unlike last time they met.

Fortunately, Sae-Jin was able to follow her advice. Hoo-woo. For about a minute, the sound of deep breathing came out of the receiver, and his relatively calmer voice followed soon after.

- "An item I must procure right away has become available. I'm well aware that the proceeds from the sale of the potions haven't come in yet. However, right now, I have 10 bottles of potions finished and in stock. I won't ask money for them, but can you help m..."

"Huh? You already have 10 in stock?!"

Sae-Jin was in a serious hurry but Hazeline's thoughts were focused elsewhere.

How long has it been since he was here beforelast, but he already brewed 10 more?

Of course, she didn't expect every single one of them to be a High grade potion like before. If that was the case, then he'd be The Alchemy Personified. But, to have created 10 potions in less than a month – if they were around Mid rank in grade or lower, then well, it was comparable to the level of an alchemy workshop. It was an utter nonsensical joke no one would believe if a lone alchemist, a human at that, managed to match a workshop's output.

- "Yes, I have 10 bottles. I can guarantee their efficacy. One potion can greatly increase the constitution, another is an inferior version of 'A Goblin's Kindness' that has recovery effects, while

the other one increases resistance towards elements..."

"Eh, eh? Hold on, what did you say just now?!"

Hazeline shot up from her seat in shock. Now, it was her turn to feel restless. Not only she couldn't figure out how he had brewed 10 potions so quickly, but she also heard the "increases resistance towards elements" bit. THAT, was a serious problem. Because, that kind of potion no longer existed. Or more correctly, the recipes for those potions were all long forgotten.

Around 60 years ago, among the "first alchemists" to cross the World's Rift and settle down on Earth was a certain household named Rodes.

Often referred to as the Rodes Family, their alchemy skills were truly peerless, and it was not wrong to say their alchemic legacy became the forefather of the modern alchemy.

And just like the modern day alchemists, the Rodes Family was very secretive and never shared their formula with anyone. As a consequence, there were numerous potions only they could make, and amongst those, one of them happened to be the "Element Resistance" potion.

But around 30 years ago, the Rodes Family suddenly disappeared without a trace – as if they didn't exist in the first place. So, all the recipes and formulas for the Rodes Family potions also vanished along with them.

Not only the Rodes Family left behind an indelible mark on the world of alchemy, they also left behind a mystery that could not be solved by the current level of modern day alchemists.

They were seen as a source of inspiration, as idols for adulation, and a great motivational factor for many alchemists, thus becoming a legend in the process.

And now, this one guy was busy saying that he had created a potion that only a Rodes could have made...

"W, w, wait a minute. What potion did you say it was? Elemental resistance?"

- ".....Yes, I did."

At his composed reply, Hazeline nearly fainted on the spot. She so badly wanted to go to where he was and confirm the truth of this potion for herself.

"B, but how? No, wait – where are you now? I'll come and see you....!!"

- "No, that's a little inconvenient for me."

Sae-Jin replied carefully at her strangely excited reactions.

But Hazeline was feeling really, madly frustrated right now. This conversation was now at a level well past the realm of strange and into something completely crazy.

So, so many, countless alchemists, including Hazeline, formed research groups in order to challenge the mystery of element resistance. The reasoning for the "Great Alchemy Conference" that occurred 5 years ago was precisely that – to recreate all the potions that had vanished along with the disappearance of the Rodes Family. They focused on 5 items back then, and one of them was this Element Resistance potion.

But this gathering, organised by the Knights Orders and led by them instead of alchemists, dissolved after not only failing to discover the recipes, they couldn't even figure out the ingredients used for the potions. Deep mistrust ended up developing between each alchemist that had participated, and towards the Knights, as a result.

"....Ah, no. Well... if Sir Sae-Jin really brewed a Resistance potion.... we need to meet first. We should talk about this only after we meet personally! I, I will go to you. Where are you?"

That very same day, two of them met in the Yoseon Alchemy House.

"A Mid grade. It should be around the Mid grade."

Hazeline spoke while examining the scarlet-coloured liquid contained in a potion bottle.

Her breathing was rising up rapidly. Using her 17 years of alchemy experience, she confirmed it. This looked exactly the same as the illustrations of "Rodes' Element Resistance" potion she had seen. It was really the Element Resistance potion.

Even though it was rated at a rather lowly Mid grade, there was little doubt Knights Orders would go mad with desire for this potion. The elemental attacks of the Monsters rated upper Mid Tier or higher were very difficult to deal with, after all.

The physical damage could be negated with armours, but these armours couldn't protect the body underneath against the attacks of flames and ice spewed out by, say, a Dragon Turtle or a Wyvern, so the Knights had to defend using only the Mana Barriers.

But unless one was a High Tier Knight, it was difficult to endure the incredibly high Mana expenditure. Even those amazing Highest Tier Knights didn't dare to casually engage Monsters that used innate elemental attacks without a recovery potion.

However, the story changed a great deal with the Element Resistance potion in the picture. This was a potion used exclusively for the subjugation of the top ranked Monsters. Following the standards set by the Rodes Family, a Mid grade could negate as much as half of the damage from the innate element attacks. That meant a High Tier Knight would have a far easier time fighting the Monster as the amount of Mana devoted to maintaining the Barrier would decrease.

"This potion.... did you make it alone?"

"Yes. It was difficult to brew them so I could only brew two

bottles' worth."

Sae-Jin nodded his head. This Element Resistance potion had a painstakingly exacting compounding requirements. Not only did it require over 20 different types of ingredients, it also required him to be very careful when combining the said ingredients. Hell, even with the Goblin's Craftsmanship skill, he ended up failing numerous times.

Actually, the reason why he made this potion was to increase his proficiency with that very skill. The thing was, he received more skill proficiency points when he failed making potions, compared to when he was successful.

""

At this very moment in time, the two people gazing at this potion were thinking two very different things.

Hazeline was momentarily speechless after hearing him say "could only brew two bottles."

She became hopelessly curious to the identity of the man in front of her. How could he drag the recipe of a potion now long forgotten back out of the abyss all alone? Just how could he....

'Maybe, it was his master?'

That was when a lightbulb went off in Hazeline's head.

The Rodes Family hid away from the view. Some said they were murdered by other jealous alchemists, some said they simply had returned to their original world. But they were all just theories. The only real fact remaining, was that they just vanished into thin air like blowing dust.

What if, the reason why they disappeared was because they felt sick and tired of alchemy...

It made a certain amount of sense. Great things were expected of the Rodes Family and thus they received huge product orders compared to other alchemists, and the burden and the enormous pressure created by those demands would be like an axe hanging over their heads.

When a famous alchemist had enough of all things alchemy, there were two avenues left to tread for this person.

Either he or she start raising a successor, or like Hazeline here, become a Manager of an Alchemy House.

But a Rodes would never, ever choose the latter!!

"....Hmm. Never mind that, what is this favour you want to ask me?"

Hazeline worked hard to maintain a poker face while asking him, as things began falling into their logical – her logic – place rather quickly. Alchemists highly valued the master and apprentice relationship above all else. There was no need to ask about an uncertain matter and potentially sour their current relationship, after all.

"By any chance, have you already heard of the Werewolf's Mana Stone? The story came out this morning."

Sae-Jin too did his best to maintain his poker face. The minimum expected price may have been \$1.76 million, but it was expected to be sold at the max amount of \$3.5 million. Even if he used up the remaining half of the Sabre-tooth Tiger's fang and concoct more High grade potions to sell immediately, the proceeds from the sale would only come in after at least a month's time.

So, Hazeline's assistance was a necessity if he wanted to buy the Werewolf's Mana Stone.

Although this was only their third time meeting like this, Sae-Jin didn't really have anyone else to rely on besides her. Plus, he was feeling confident, as well. He could create potions on the same level of Goblins, so who can refuse him outright?

"Ah, that. Yes, I saw it. But why would you... Perhaps?"

"Yes. I truly wish to purchase that Mana Stone. But the problem is..."

...I don't have the money. Sae-Jin just couldn't say that out loud. So, he pushed forward the potions that were as good as money towards her.

""

Hazeline was busy punching the numbers on the calculator in her head as she gazed at those potions.

The Element Resistance potion. Nominally, since it was rated a Mid grade it'd be priced around \$45 thousand US at most on the market, but through a sales commission, she should be able to extract as much as \$350 thousand US. It was a shocking amount of money considering that only one person could drink this potion.

The other potions were also quite useful as well. But taking into account the sales tax, the total would not go over \$530 thousand US. Adding the proceeds from the sales of A Goblin's Kindness potions, \$2.47 million after tax. The Mana Stone of the Werewolf was expected to go for \$3.5 million. So, there was a shortage of another \$1 million or so.

However – there was something far more valuable than a million dollars to consider here.

It was the future relationship between these two people, Hazeline and Kim Sae-Jin.

If this man was indeed the successor to the Rodes Family legacy, or... even if he wasn't, there was a need to maintain a good relationship with the talent of the century like him.

'I can't afford to let him go.'

She was already half convinced anyways. This man had to be the God of Alchemy, Rodes' apprentice.

Without that explanation, there was just no freaking way he'd be

able to perfectly replicate a potion that had been lost to the world for almost 30 years!

"Hmm..."

Hazeline was feeling relieved that she had met this man only recently. If it was in the past, when she was still full of pride in her own alchemy skills – if she met him then, who knows what kind of mess she'd have created out of jealousy and pettiness.

"I will definitely procure it, that much I can promise you. Please be rest assured. I've earned quite a bit of money up until now. Even though I look like this, I was quite a famous alchemist and a Wizard in the past, I'll have you know."

Hazeline smiled brightly as she spoke, and that caused Sae-Jin to break out into a deep grin of his own as well.

*

In the empty Manager's office, after Sae-Jin had left. Hazeline logged onto the Alchemists' Cafe after 3 years of absence. It was a type of specific job-related forum where only the current or former alchemists could join. She stayed away due to various reasons but today, she became curious if there was any new information regarding Rodes Family and so, here she was.

"...It sure is lively here."

She muttered to herself. Even though it had been 30 years since the disappearance of the Rodes Family, it seemed that there was still a lot to talk about. There was a dedicated thread for all topics Rodes-related, and the last message was posted only about 10 minutes ago.

Out of all the stuff that piled up during the last 3 years, she compiled only the posts that required a "VVIP" clearance to read and carefully went through them. But, very little contained anything useful to her, if any.

"....Tsk, my eyes rotted for no reason."

Hazeline logged off, after finding nothing useful.

< 06. The Mana Stone of a Beast (2) > Fin.

(I've had to change a bit with the Element Resistance potion's name. The raw kept on saying "속성저항" which literally means innate/natural resistance and I was planning to go with that, then I read a bit further and there was the mention of fire/ice based attacks and this potion raises resistance towards those, so I figured calling it "Element Resistance" sounded a bit better, a bit more game-y, if you will.)

Chapter 17: The Mana Stone of a Beast (3)

Located on the island of Sebit, the famous Hyunwol Auction House was considered as one of the world's best and consequently, the auctioned items were of equally high quality as well. They only dealt with rare loot dropped by the Monsters defeated by the Knights Orders based around Seoul; they also selected only the uniquely named "Branded Goods" out of all the equipment submitted by various smithies around the country. (TL: the author used the term "閃품" in this sentence. Lit. means named products/luxury goods, etc. Thinking back to Zenobis gauntlet from one of the previous chapters, I decided to go with "Branded Goods" until I can come up with a better alternative. Which remains to be seen... oh well.)

It had been 5 years since Hazeline's last visit to this Hyunwol Auction House. She didn't feel all that much different, however. If anything, she felt like swearing out aloud thinking about how she'd have to tolerate all these people and all that noise they would make.

'It's still the same useless showing off of wealth.' (TL: author lit. said "useless money party.")

Just like a party on a boat, there were plenty of colourful lights brightening up the night sky up above the auction house building built on the island.

"We welcome you to Hyunwol Auction House."

An employee bent his back to greet Hazeline. Every employee working in the Hyunwol Auction House possessed quick wits, fast enough to easily determine the high value of the robe Hazeline was wearing.

As soon as Hazeline handed over her VIP ticket, she received a mini computer and a numbered card from an employee behind the counter. The number on it was 77. It was a number that made her

feel somewhat confident. Happy at this lucky occurrence, she walked into the auction premise.

"....Mister Sae-Jin? Can you hear me?"

She spoke softly to Sae-Jin who was listening from somewhere via the bracelet on her left wrist. 10 seconds of silence later, he replied back.

- "Yes, I can hear you well."

"I've just arrived at the auction house. The auction itself should end in about 3 to 4 hours, and the exchange of ownership will take place tomorrow... I will give you the certificate of transfer as you need to come in person to collect the item. As we've spoke before, that is something I can't do."

The Werewolf's Mana Stone was the item put forth by the Raven Knights Order. Even if Hyunwol was commissioned to hold the auction for the items, during the transfer of ownership, the seller (sometimes a representative) and the buyer had to meet face to face.

And she could easily guess who the Raven Knights Order will send out as their representative. One of only 41 Highest Tier ranked Knights in South Korea, Kim Yu-Rin.

Hazeline would rather kill herself if it meant seeing that woman's face. No, scratch that, if the two of them did meet, then one of them would die for sure. Although she wanted to help Sae-Jin out, they've only met three times. She wasn't willing to brave that kind of danger for him.

- "The time... the process won't take long, yes?"

"Yes. It'll take an hour, max. Since I'll make the payment today, you can simply pitch up in two days time and fetch the item."

At Hyunwol Auction House, if one wanted to bid for an item, then that person must possess, on their persons, at least half of the bidding amount, and also must make the full payment within four days of the successful bidding attempt. It was a quite strict policy, but it couldn't be helped as Hyunwol placed trust and speedy resolutions as their utmost priority.

- "....Understood."

Hazeline could sense the hidden unhappiness in Sae-Jin's voice even from here. She was curious as to why he put so much emphasis on time but in the end, she simply told him to wait for her and ended the call.

"Hmph."

Hazeline carefully minded her robe from folding up and sat down on her designated VIP seat. Soon after, people wearing luxurious formal suits or clothing-style armours noisily entered and rapidly filled up the interior.

The auction finally commenced just as Hazeline's head was getting dizzy from all the people present here.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I warmly welcome you!!"

The announcer with a chiselled good looks greeted the participating audience. Then he lightly introduced the lot on offer for today and without further ado, commenced with the auction proper.

"Introducing our first item – The Domenique's Necklace!! This is a wonderful necklace said to help with the wearer's Mana circulation." (TL: "도메니크" I swear, I didn't misspell the name on purpose…)

Normally, when a piece of equipment has its maker's name attached to it, or have its own unique name, then that item was considered as 'Branded Goods'. The naming of an equipment was actually set in stone by law and had to follow a certain guideline. Didn't matter whether it was handmade or mass manufactured, if the government agency didn't acknowledge it, then the equipment's name had to include its base material and its category.

For example - Sae-Jin's weapon, the steel mace.

If the smith improved his or her skill and became an "apprentice", then he or she could add modifiers to the names of the items – such as, "Unbreakable" or "Strong."

Next up was the "artisan". At the level of an artisan, the government would allow more leeway when naming the items. So, an artisan could attach his or her name to the items, just like the Domenique's Necklace from before.

And finally, "master". After climbing the summit of equipment refinement and manufacture, he or she would receive the title of a master craftsman from the government, and could also grab hold of the greatest honour of legally being allowed to name their items any way they see fit.

The master craftsmen, with this honour bestowed onto them, faced no restrictions in naming their products, so stuff made by these people often came with names that had basically nothing to do with their intended purposes. Examples included things like "Call of the Taebaek" or "The Ideal of Rodes". With naming senses like these, it was no wonder that there was a rumour floating around, of masters burdened by peer pressure frequenting certain consultancies specialising in finding the perfect names.

'That's a good item.'

Necklaces that aided the Mana circulation were hard to come by. It was quite likely the maker, Domenique, would rise from the position of an artisan to a master in the near future. However, that was of no concern to Hazeline right now.

She spent the time fighting off her heavy eyelids, while yawning sporadically.

"And this lot is the item brought to us by Korea's best Knights Order, Raven – the Werewolf's Mana Crystal." (TL: the author suddenly started calling the Mana Stone a crystal here. Hmm, a typo?)

Finally. The item she was waiting for had made its entrance. A Mana Stone that was shaped like a wolf walking on four legs, and coloured in the shade of deep grey. Mana Stones rated upper Mid Tier had such defining characteristics. Mana Stones accumulated in the hearts of the Monsters resembled the appearances of their hosts.

"A Werewolf is well known as a rare Monster, and it is believed this was the very first time it had appeared in South Korea."

The auctioneer broke the ice with a well known fact. Several collectors got ready to place their bids, their eyes focusing on the jewel-like Mana Stone. Hazeline also took a glance at her personal bank balance and checked the amount there.

After quitting the life of a Wizard and an alchemist, she kept most of her assets as hard cash, so she did have enough of an arsenal for this task – \$5.4 million US.

'Fuu.... he will pay it back, right?'

Even though she promised to help him out a week ago, but now, at the thought of spending this hard-earned wealth of hers, uncertainty and worries invaded her mind ever so slightly. He wouldn't skip town after getting the Mana Stone now, would he?

"The opening bid is set at \$45 thousand, US. The bid increments will be fixed at \$1000. Ah!! First, the gentleman bidder, no 30!! \$46 thousand!!"

The bidding had begun. An overweight human, a Soo-in with a pair of animal ears on top of his head, even an Elf Wizard holding a magic staff. All these people, and more, began the intense bidding war just for the privilege of taking this Mana Stone home.

\$450 thousand, \$900 thousand, \$1 million, \$1.3 million, \$2.6 million. The bidding price instantly shot up towards the expected maximum amount without taking a single break.

"No 48, the beautiful Elf Wizard has put forward \$4.1 million!! The Mana Stone could give her inspirations when practising magic, so it's an excellent choice!!"

And so, the final plateau had come. The Elf Wizard that called the amount of \$4.1 million carried a victorious expression on her face.

"Is there any other competing bids? The Werewolf's Mana Stone with near unlimited potential uses!! You may never know, you could gain enormous power of the Werewolf from it!!"

The auctioneer spouted a load of bull c**p. Hazeline could only chuckle at his audacity. She was still feeling somewhat regretful at the fact that she had to spend more than half of her wealth to buy a totally worthless trinket.... but for the sake of a personal connection, it had to be done.

"3 times, I shall call for 3 more times!! \$4.1 million!!"

As soon as those words came out, Hazeline got ready to submit the bid of \$4.2 million.

"\$4.1 million!! Is there no other bids? This is the final call!!"

But she changed her mind at the last second.

"Oh, oh!! Number 77, a mysterious lady with \$4.5 million!!"

The auction hall grew noisy, and Hazeline grinned deeply.

'I've got my pride as an Elf, so how can I waste time raising my bid by only \$100 thousand?'

*

"I've deposited the money."

"Yes, thank you very much. We've confirmed the payment."

Behind the auction stage, Hazeline was conversing with the agent from the auction house regarding the item she had bought.

"Two days. Please set the schedule for two days later. Oh, and also provide me with a certificate of transfer as well."

"....A certificate of transfer?"

"Yes. It's a gift for someone."

Hazeline spoke as if it was nothing much. Although it was a debt and not a gift, but still, calling it as such made her appear more wealthy. A woman making a \$4.5 million gift, what a cool person.

"Oh... Of course. We understand."

The agent nodded his head and summoned the employees.

"Fuu."

Sae-Jin wetted his dried lips as he exited the Seoul Station under the bright glare of the sunny afternoon and climbed aboard the pre-booked taxi.

From the Seoul Station to Sebit island, 10 minutes of ride in the high class taxi that burned Mana as fuel. As soon as he disembarked in front of the Hyunwol Auction House, the security guards there blocked the robe-wearing Sae-Jin's path after thinking that he was a suspicious person.

"I'm here to collect the item bought in the auction."

The promised time was 1:10 PM. Currently, it was 1:05 PM. After checking out his certificate of transfer, the security guards guided Sae-Jin in a respectful manner.

He was brought to the front of an elevator used exclusively by VIPs, and as he waited, a sales agent approached his side and while smiling she entered the lift alongside him.

"Are you an alchemist?"

Wizards usually didn't hide their faces with robes.

She asked him out of respect, but Sae-Jin didn't reply back. He simply waited stiffly for the elevator to take him to his destination as quickly as possible.

""

When he coldly didn't react to her, she became abashed and her ears and tail stood straight up. A tail, because she was a Canine-type Soo-in. (TL: a Soo-in is a "beast man".)

"To...day's weather is nice, yes? It's the middle of a winter but it's like an early Summer day. I wonder if something's going to happen..."

She bravely continued to chat him up despite the risk of offending him. The sole reason for her behaviour was that, she was a Canine-type Soo-in. The ideal type of mates for a Canine-type Soo-in who possessed a powerful sense of smell, was a man with a nice body odour. And with his passive skill active, the scent spreading out from Sae-Jin's body was as incomparably manly as it could get.

"...It's really nice."

A wolf. Yes, it was a scent of a wolf. Making sure she wasn't seen, she sniffed the air and her face softly reddened at the seductive aroma.

Tting -

But the cruel elevator had arrived at the top floor for the VIP guests already. The sales agent regretfully watched Sae-Jin's back as he walked away.

"....Wow."

The spotless, polished marble floor till lights reflected off; the expansive view out the window showing the Han river and the beauty of Seoul; an azure shade dying the interior blue to confuse the senses as if one was walking in the sky – this stunning space was the VIP-only Sky Lounge of the Hyunwol Auction House, where no regular folk could ever hope to enter in their entire lifetimes.

"Looks like you've arrived."

As Sae-Jin stepped on the marble floor with a dazed face, having forgotten about his urgent lack of time, a soft yet righteous voice came to him from somewhere.

"Hello there. I'm Kim Yu-Rin, a Knight ranked Highest Tier, from the Raven Knights Order."

It was Kim Yu-Rin. Completely opposite of when she was talking to the Goblin version of Sae-Jin, she maintained a cold, expressionless face as she offered her hand.

"Ah.... yes, how do you do."

For Sae-Jin, it was their second meeting. But for Yu-Rin, it was her first. Whatever the case may have been, the two people faced each other and shook hands.

< 06. A Mana Stone of a Beast (3) > Fin.

(TL: I've been using the US dollars after converting the original amount from the Korean Won, And in this chapter in particular, I had to round up pretty much all of the bidding amounts to make reading the chapter a bit less hectic. I hope you guys are okay with that.)

Chapter 18: The Mana Stone of a Beast (4)

"Please confirm that it is the right item."

Kim Yu-Rin was still beautiful. Subtly different from back when she was lively and refreshing; though, he still found her current robotic and cold mannerisms just as alluring as before.

"Here it is."

Kim Yu-Rin handed the briefcase containing the Mana Crystal over to Sae-Jin. From the slight opening, the light shone from the Mana Stone. Sae-Jin spoke while giving her the certificate of transfer. (TL: no, I didn't make a mistake here. The author again said Mana Crystal in the raw, then reverted back to Stone in the very next sentence.)

"Thank you very much."

One more handshake followed that. Their business-like conduct really suited the claim of this meeting being their very first. Their focus was solely on getting the official business completed, leaving a very little gap for anyone else to b**t in. Still, Kim Yu-Rin found the attitude of Sae-Jin quite agreeable as he showed no ulterior motives towards her.

"Ah. Well then, you two. Shall we go somewhere and have a nice meal together?"

Suddenly, the Hyunwol Auction House's director spoke after observing the duo for a while.

His suggestion wasn't really a necessary procedure to follow, where the auction house's director takes both the seller and the bidder out for a meal after a successful transaction. Most of the time, it was requested by the buyer, and seller refusing the invitation would be seen as being disrespectful.

One could argue that truthfully, the chance to have this meal was one of the reasons why the final hammer price of the Mana Crystal exceeded the maximum expected amount of \$3.5 million. A chance of having a meal together with Kim Yu-Rin would be of quite a worth, after all.

"If that's the case, shall we go? I know a good restaurant frequented by our Knights Order."

At this suggestion, Kim Yu-Rin assumed a polite smile and tried to guide Sae-Jin.

But, against all expectation, Sae-Jin shook his head.

"Is it possible to delay the meal for a later date? I'm currently running short on time."

Kim Yu-Rin's body stopped dead, still in her trek towards the elevator. Sae-Jin couldn't see it, but her face was strangely distorted at that moment. A profession that was busier than a Highest Tier Knight would be rather difficult to find....

She worked hard to straighten her face and turned around to stare at the lower half of his face before opening her mouth. Because of the robe's hood pulled low, she could only see his face's lower half.

"I apologise, but if it's not today, then I won't have enough time as well. Another date is a little..."

"If that's the case, then let us forget about the meal. Apologies, for my lack of time."

Sae-Jin was adamant in his position. In that moment as she was opening her mouth to say something, Sae-Jin had already walked past her and was entering the elevator.

"W, wait a moment!!"

As she was being flustered after receiving this strange indifference for the very first time in her life, the elevator doors were already closing.

"...wow. Miss Yu-Rin, you just got rejected, right?!"

The junior Knights around her spoke in a shocked tone. They weren't mocking her, but rather, they seemed to be genuinely surprised as well.

But Yu-Rin dazedly watched for a long time the elevator that had now arrived back down to the 1st floor, unable to even make a retort.

*

"Take me to the Seoul Station."

Sae-Jin checked the remaining time after he boarded a taxi. Around 70 minutes. Thankfully, there was enough breathing room left.

Sighing out in relief, he again confirmed that the Mana Stone was carefully housed inside the briefcase. A thick smile automatically spread on his lips.

As soon as he arrives back at the cave in Gangwon Province, he'd absorb this Mana Stone and wait in leisure for the evolution to occur....

But that kind of relaxed thought couldn't last for long.

Kwaaahang!!

First, there was an ear-busting explosion of noise, and right after, an enormous vibration shook the car's frame. This unidentifiable event made Sae-Jin's body float up, and when he came to, he found himself thrown out of the taxi.

".... Oh, sh*t..."

Through the hazy view, he could see cruelly twisted wrecks of cars and debris littering the asphalt. Suppressing the pain from his head and ribs, Sae-Jin confirmed the status of the item in his arms. Fortunately, the Mana Stone was intact.

"KyahakKyahakKyahak~!!"

A wicked cackle dominated his ringing ears. He followed the

sound back to its origin, and looked past the twisted wreckage of the car.

Wings of a bat on its back, its looks reminiscent of a miniature devil, a Monster called Gargoyle was there. This b*****d mindlessly slammed its body against a poor taxi and totally crushed it.

"...Keuk."

Sae-Jin's body trembled as he stood up.

As he began to think why on earth a Gargoyle had shown up in the middle of a city, a completely unrealistic sight a hundred times worse than that was unfolding before his eyes.

And that was the countless hordes of Monsters. There were Monsters in the sky and on the streets. From the ragtag groups of Monsters such as Orcs and Skeleton Soldiers, to a Wyvern slicing up the air and blocking the sunlight with its massive body, and even Ogres that violently shook the earth every time they took a step forward. All of this was unfolding in less than three minutes.

Unable to differentiate whether this was still the capital of Korea, Seoul, or a Monster field from this unfolding spectacle, Sae-Jin momentarily stood there, his mouth hanging loose in a daze.

- A Monster Outbreak, 1st level alert!! All citizens must evacuate the area. The Knights Orders will arrive shortly...

Sae-Jin woke up from his stupor thanks to the automated alert coming from somewhere. Only then, did he realise that the Gargoyle was staring daggers at him. With those full moon-like grey eyes.

""

He didn't show any further reaction, but slid his hand slowly inside the briefcase. A Gargoyle was a shrewd and cruel Monster. He heard that due to its abundant curiosity, this Monster was known to play around with its human victims.

"Kyaaaa!!"

"S, save me!!"

"Mommy!!"

At the sudden outbreak of these Monsters' assault, the surroundings had rapidly deteriorated past the level of Purgatory, and now resembled Hell. Wrecked cars exploded and flames rose up from the spot, dyeing the world crimson. Buildings were collapsing, and a child was crying out in terror after losing the sight of its parents.

"...Keeruek."

But the Gargoyle focused its stares only on Sae-Jin. Seeing its slightly crooked leer, he could tell it was now regarding him as its a plaything.

A Gargoyle was a Mid Tier ranked Monster. Although it wasn't because of its physical strength, but rather, due to its sneaky characteristics that favoured setting up traps and such, but Gargoyles participating in an Outbreak would have its stats boosted to one level higher. It was hopelessly impossible for Sae-Jin of now to defeat this thing.

....

Sae-Jin's hand that was soaked in sweat blindly stumbled around inside the case until he could feel what he was looking for. It was hard and cold – the Werewolf's Mana Stone.

[Will you absorb the Mana Stone of a upper Mid Tier Werewolf? Yes/No (Warning: Currently, this Monster is much stronger than the host.)]

Whee-ick.

At the same as the message window popped up into his view, the Gargoyle flapped its wings and took flight. There was that warning, but he couldn't think too deeply about it. Gritting his

teeth, he pressed "yes".

[Synchronising with the Ebony Wolf Form, the absorption of the Werewolf's Mana Stone has commenced.... During the process of absorption, it is not possible to change to other Forms.]

And in that moment, Sae-Jin could only open his eyes abruptly.

"Keu-uuuurk!!"

An incredible pain. From all over his body, bones began growing uncontrollably, tearing his flesh and internal organs apart. This indescribable pain, comparable to being pierced by a steel pipe dozens of times in a single second. Tears of blood dripped out from the corners of his reddened eyes and the mixture of spit and blood spewed out from his loosely hanging mouth.

"...Keek?"

At the sight of a man that looked like he was committing suicide, the Gargoyle tilted its head and came in closer.

"guttural groan in pain..."

All over his body, bones repeatedly stretched then tore out of his flesh before retracting back. The sight of him vomiting out a bucket of blood with a pained whimper every time that happened was enough to make the Gargoyle break out in a grin.

"Keek Keek Keek."

The Gargoyle slowly flew up and landed on Sae-Jin's back after he collapsed on the asphalt. It poked his head with its finger for a moment or two, then as if it found this amusing, the Monster cackled again.

"Keek Keek Keek..."

Unfortunately, a Gargoyle was a type of Monster that got bored rather easily. The ugly creature raised its sharp claws with a smile on its face after having instantly lost all interest in him. The claw that could easily rip apart a person's body like cutting a radish gleamed icily.

The b*****d's weapon was raised high in the air. And Sae-Jin's head would soon be split clean open by those ugly claws...

[The absorption has been partially completed. From now on, "Beast Mode" can be utilised. Beast Mode will automatically activate when the host's life is in danger.]

It was also at this time when Sae-Jin's eyes glowed in deep yellow. Right when the claw reflecting the sunlight descended down on his head.

The claw seemed very slow. Also, it looked weak, as if it just might break into pieces after he shook it around a couple of times. Maybe, this was what a predator must've felt looking at its prey.

Sae-Jin lightly swung one of his arms and threw the creature away.

Massive noise of destruction

But the end result couldn't be called "light" at all. The claws of Gargoyle did break apart and scattered in the air, and its body was flung away into distance with a loud, explosive noise as if it was exploding drum barrel.

".....*heavy breathing*...."

Only then, did the flow of time restore back to normal; Sae-Jin tried to grasp his boiling heart as he heavily breathed in and out.

Unfortunately for him, the idea of feeling relieved was as distant as it could possibly get.

"...What the..."

His hands had become larger and sharper like that of a beast, and his body was being covered in fur. A tail was coming out of his rear, his jaws were extending, and his teeth were becoming more horrifying.

Sae-Jin dazedly stared at his hand, now covered in black fur.

This.... was the appearance of the Werewolf in the "Beast Mode". He hurriedly scanned his surroundings. Fortunately, in this hellhole there wasn't anyone with enough leeway to pay attention to his sudden transformation.

'The Human Form. Why can't I change back to the Human Form?'

That was his first question. Why was he now in the form of bipedal beast, instead of a human? Thankfully, the friendly system solved that quandary for him.

[Until the Mana Stone absorption is completed, the Human Form will not be available to the host.]

Right after that message, countless other alert windows swarmed in front of his eyes, enough to block the entirety of his view.

===

「Condition Complete: The Heart of a Beast.」

- The host has absorbed the Mana Stone of the mighty Werewolf into his heart. All stats rise by 15.
- When the absorption reaches 100%, in the Ebony Wolf Form the host can activate/deactivate either the Beast Mode or the Human Mode. (Not possible to change to other Forms until the absorption is complete.)
- Acquired Passive Skills "Flesh of a Beast", "High-Strength Claws" and "Predator."
 - ▶ Passive Skill "Flesh of a Beast" [Skill Proficiency Level: F]
- The flesh is strengthened, and small amount of damage from magic is negated.
- The wounds on the body heal rapidly through the body's excellent resilience.
- The host can freely manipulate the flow of his blood as well as a target's. However, a part of the host's body, such as claws or fangs,

must be in contact with the target's bloodstream.

- During the Human Form, the effects of the skill will be decreased.
- ▶ Passive Skill "High-Strength Wolf's Claws" [Skill Proficiency Level: F]
- The claws of a wolf that boast the strength and hardness of steel.
- When the skill level is raised, the "corporeal", "incorporeal" and even aura can be exterminated.
- During the Human Form, the effects of the skill will be decreased.
 - ▶ Passive Skill "Predator" [Skill Proficiency Level: F]
- The host will grow stronger the more enemies the host eliminates. When a stronger enemy is killed, the rate of growth will be greater.
- The prey can feel fear towards the Predator and could surrender/wish to submit under the rule of the host.

===

Too bad, there just wasn't enough time for him to sit down and properly go through all these messages.

"Take the Ogre first!! Leave the Wyvern to the Highest Tier Knight!!"

Knights were already approaching this place. Sae-Jin hid from their eyes and moved as stealthily as possible.

< 06. The Mana Stone of a Beast (4) > Fin

Chapter 19: The Mana Stone of a Beast (5)

The only difference between an Ebony Wolf and a Werewolf, not taking into account the gap in strength, was that a Werewolf could assume either a beast's appearance or that of a human being. Although nominally he was still in his Ebony Wolf Form, but on the outer appearance alone, it'd be more correct to call him a Werewolf now, instead.

[The absorption is still in progress. Impossible to change to a beast form.]

Sae-Jin gritted his teeth hard. His current form, a bipedal wolf beast, Werewolf, was just too d**n eye-catching. That's why he wanted to change into something that moved on four legs but even that was impossible.

'Make one mistake, and I'm dead.'

Right now, he was without a doubt, a Monster. He was the No.1 target for extermination by the Knights or even the Hunters. Sae-Jin lowered his body as much as possible and also used his arms as well to move.

Thankfully, his exemplary sense of smell helped him to find back alleys with no Knights or Hunters present. Plus, an Ebony Wolf was very much specialised in being stealthy. No matter how stuck he was in this Beast Mode, the people busy fleeing the scene couldn't sense his movements that had blended into the shadows.

"breaths a sigh of relief, animal style"

After walking for awhile, Sae-Jin sensed that he had escaped the initial bloody battlefield between Monsters and Knights and let out a breath of relief. But the surrounding situation still wasn't really safe just because there weren't any Knights nearby. Low Tier and Mid Tier Monsters were attacking buildings, or were busy killing citizens while mowing down the boardwalks.

A Monster fell on top of a car parked inside a damaged building, and the flames erupted from the exploding car. A child fell over as the explosion nearly engulfed her. But Sae-Jin couldn't do a thing. For his own survival, he had to disregard everything and run.

In other words, he had to disregard the child's cries entering his ears.

"Mommyyyyy!!"

"S, Su-Jung!!"

At the child's cries, the mother's voice called back. The face of a woman who must've been the mother was dyed black.

And there were debris from the building falling on top of this child who was collapsed on the street with her legs bruised.

"!!"

He didn't hesitate for long. His legs moved first.

He used the "Whirlwind Dash". Covering the distance of more than 500 metres in a single breath, Sae-Jin hugged the child in a protective embrace. Immediately after, a terrifying amount of building materials and steel beams crashed down on them. The mother's tear-soaked scream tore through the air.

'Doesn't hurt.'

As expected, the body of the Ebony Wolf in Beast Mode was sturdy. He couldn't see because of being under a tone of rubble, but otherwise, he could feel zero pain. He quickly confirmed the safety of the sniffling child within his embrace.

Then, he deeply extended an arm and powerfully swung it.

Kwaaaahang!!

The hill of rubble weighing down on the beast's back was scattered into the air.

"Su-Jung... Eeeek!!"

The first person he saw was the child's mother. She was holding a baby in one hand while approaching closer to save her other kid. Unfortunately, there was a single beast that completely filled up her sight.

A big body that easily exceeded 2 metres in height and a wolf's head that proudly displayed its scary fangs. Although it was covered in black fur, that fur couldn't hide all those intimidating muscles of the beast.

The woman retreated back from the fear-inducing form before falling down on her b**t. But within the arms of that horrifying beast was her daughter. She found a sliver of courage and tried very hard to stand up on her two trembling legs....

"Krrnng."

"Hiyaak!!"

However, the beast moved first. The woman screamed out in fright but the beast simply walked in a thumping footsteps and put the girl down in front of her.

Unable to figure out what just happened, she glanced back and forth at her child and at the beast before finally understanding the situation, then she hugged little girl tightly.

[500 metres, Northward. Numerous strong humans.]

Sae-Jin couldn't just watch this scene of reunion relaxedly. Knights that had quickly subjugated the Monsters were moving out from the origin of the outbreak and were starting to sweep the outer perimeters of Seoul.

He rolled his legs and rapidly vacated out of there.

"This... eh?"

The woman raised her head wondering whether she should thank the strange beast or not, but like a mirage on a Summer day, the wolf beast was already long gone. The military cordoned off a section of Seoul in order to mitigate the damage from the Monster Outbreak. Sae-Jin could understand this fact without much difficulty by the faint whiff of firearms in the air, and so, instead of trying to leave Seoul, he decided to hide somewhere until the absorption of the Mana Stone was completed.

As he was stealthily roaming around the city of Seoul, he found the entrance to the sewers by chance and hid himself in there.

'...I feel like dying.'

Sae-Jin lied down on the wet stone floor and breathed heavily. He could more or less tolerate the depressing atmosphere draped in darkness and the eerie, moist air. But he just couldn't handle the rotting smell. And maybe because of the side effects of the absorption, the strangely cold temperature was also proving to be rather difficult to tolerate.

His eyes closed bit by bit. It was dangerous to fall asleep as someone could find him. But the sleepiness, caused by the side effects of the absorption, easily defeated his worries.

'Since they are too busy exterminating Monsters, so hopefully they wouldn't think of coming down to the sewers...'

Hoping this was true, Sae-Jin slowly fell into slumber.

*

– A Fissure appearing near a nameless church located in the suburbs of Banpo burst open before it could be erased, and this event caused a great disturbance in Seoul. As the credit rating of the Republic of Korea is expected to suffer from the first Monster Outbreak in 5 years, the citizens are bitterly voicing out whether the Knights Orders, who were caught unprepared by the Fissure bursting open, are to be blamed for this...

"Pay no attention to that."

Right now, after subduing the Monster Outbreak to some degree, tired and injured Knights were taking breaks by lying or sitting down on the grounds. The Highest Tier Knight Kim Yu-Rin consoled a worried subordinate Knight as he was watching the news.

"It's always the same story after Monsters attack a city, right? Even though it might be tough this time, don't get too discouraged as it's not our fault anyway."

...It's not our fault but the private security corporations that neglected the repairs and maintenance of the Fissure detection equipment, added Yu-Rin in her head, her face crumpled in irritation at these thoughts.

Originally, it was left to Knights Orders to monitor the Monsters and possible appearances of the Fissures. However, the government took away and handed the responsibilities over to several private security companies after someone argued nonsensically that the burden placed on Knights Orders trying to manage such a high-tech department as well would be too much for them to handle.

Truthfully, it was responsibilities only in name, as, in all honesty, it was all very unfair type of a deal where they only cared about profits and the real responsibilities were dumped on the Knights Orders' doorsteps. Since it was the Knights Orders that got blamed if Monsters rampaged around, like today, even though it was those f*cking bastards that were getting paid to monitor the Fissures.

"....Yes."

She left behind the still-depressed subordinate and headed towards the temporary medical facility set up to house the injured people.

But the mood in that place was weird. Of course, there being no horrific injuries like someone losing a limb or something similar like that played a part, but at the moment, Knights were huddled together in one spot and were busy making strange faces while watching the hologram projection from a mobile phone. Their expressions were full of surprise and riddle.

"...What are you all doing?"

Many people lost their lives and the amount of property damage was difficult to quantify. Of course, that didn't mean everyone should observe the sorrowful mood religiously, but still, that kind of behaviour was unfitting of the current situation.

"Huh?! Oh, hello there!"

The Knights hurriedly switched off the projection and greeted her after recognising her face. The Knights gathered here were not from the same Orders but would unite under one banner, the Country, and act together in case of an emergency. So every Knight with lower ranking than Yu-Rin had to show her respect even if they were not from the same Order.

"You don't have to bow your waist that much since you're injured. I'm simply asking you because I'm curious. What were you all watching just now?"

At Yu-Rin's words, the instigator who showed the projections to other Knights, a male Mid Tier Knight from the Raven Order, Yi Soo-Han answered back hesitantly.

"There was a strange news coming out during the evacuation of civilians, so..."

"What news?"

"Ah, well, it's just that.... uhm, Miss Yu-Rin. I'm asking this just in case... but we really did kill that Werewolf, didn't we?"

Yu-Rin's face crumpled. What the hell was this guy even saying...?

"Of course. Where did that Werewolf's Mana Stone come from,

otherwise?"

"....Right? But, the thing is... looks like there's another Werewolf out there. A citizen took a picture. Even if it's an emergency situation, there's always someone out there filming stuff. Somehow, we convinced him not to upload the footage to SNS for the time being, but... please take a look."

Yi Soo-Han continued with his words as the hologram was projected from the mobile phone.

"Here's the images of the Werewolf but seriously, it's really unbelievable. A Werewolf is supposedly a rare Monster, right? But the thing's even more strange this time around."

The first image shown was the fallen rubble from a building piled up on the ground while a woman was screaming her head out in front of it. Kim Yu-Rin saw this horrifying scene and angrily admonished the subordinate Knight for having a poor taste, but Yi Soo-Han, while sweating heavily, pleaded with her to check out the following image.

"...Huh?"

It was as he said before. The next image was so unrealistic, she had to wonder whether it was Photoshopped or something. With a loud explosion, the rubble flew up in the air, and from there two life forms appeared. One was a beast, while the other was small child with her eyes squeezed shut in its arms.

"It's strange, right? It looks like the Werewolf was protecting the child. There's an even clearer recording, too. Since this area was a bit farther away from the original Monster Outbreak spot, a few CCTV cameras managed to survive the chaos."

Yi Soo-Han then played the recordings from the CCTV cameras, and Kim Yu-Rin watched them all with a totally dazed expression. The falling building material on top of the kid. A black lifeform moving so fast, leaving only an indistinct blur on the footage. It

was for certain. That Werewolf definitely jumped in among the falling rubble with an intention to "save."

"I showed this to a handful of Soo-in Knights, and their reactions aren't no laughing matter. They are raising a ruckus, saying this could be the legendary Lycanthrope. Obviously, it's all empty bi*chings, though. Ah, I wasn't swearing – it was really a bi*ch. They were Canine-type Soo-ins." (TL: This guy here made a pun, which is somewhat lost in translation. I tried my best to preserve the attempted joke but oh, well.)

At his words, Yu-Rin nodded her head in agreement. Lycanthropes didn't migrate to Earth. Back on the "other" world, they were the race that received treatments ranging from being shunned to even being subjected to extermination. And now, they would remain simply as creatures of legends, or even from a myth.

"....It is rather strange, sure. But now isn't the time to watch something like this. Before I confiscate that phone, put it down and concentrate on healing your injuries. And, it'd be bothersome if mass media learns of this information, so you better check your mouth, too."

"Ah, that... I believe it's better to let the media know about this."

"What rubbish are you spewing now?"

Kim Yu-Rin frowned and glared at the man.

"I mean, it's not our fault anyway but we still have to swallow lots of ill will. So why not circulate this footage to mass media and take the attention away from us? The grieving for the victims can come later... Khm. I'm truly sorry."

As he was about to carry on with his words, Yi Soo-Han finally noticed that her expressions were steadily getting darker so he quickly lowered his head.

"Better learn to filter your mouth more carefully."

After spitting out the threatening words of warning, she turned

Inside the dark and dank sewers where not a ray of light existed. Kim Sae-Jin opened his eyes after getting a whiff of humans.

[300 metres, Northward. One Human, one Soo-in.]

At that moment. his half awakened consciousness felt the coldness. He quickly checked the current situation of his body. There was a lot of fur. He was still in the Beast Mode, but his fears were assuaged as soon as a new message window popped up.

[The absorption has been completed. The Active Skill "Beast Mode/Human Mode" has been acquired. (It's possible to change Forms from now on.)]

- ▶ Beast Mode/Human Mode [Growth Level: F]
- Can change between the Beast Mode and the Human Mode in the Wolf Form.
- ▶ Beast Mode: Body changes to a 'Werewolf', all Stats related to the Ebony Wolf Form will be increased 3 times during this mode.
- ► Human Mode: Body changes to a 'Human', all Stats related to the Ebony Wolf Form will not be reduced during this mode.
- Calculated from the current Energy Manipulation Stat, the skill 'Beast Mode/Human Mode' can be sustained up to (450 minutes) per 24 hours.

► Stats

[Physical Strength 134]

[Endurance 133]

[Agility 175]

[Energy Manipulation 30]

[Mana Affinity 20]

[Magic Strength 20] [Luck 7]

As soon as the messages rose, Sae-Jin quickly activated the Human Mode.

But there was a problem. The difference between the human Kim Sae-Jin and Kim Sae-Jin the Ebony Wolf activating the Human Mode was not... "small" at all.

His height must have grown, judging by his eye level being higher than before, and the muscles on his body at a glance looked like he's been pumping irons all his life, and his... junior down there was now the size of a mace....

"Who goes there?"

Out of the blue, a man's shout and the chilly sensation of an ultra-sharp Mana were directed at his location.

"I'm a human!!"

Sae-Jin replied quickly. And at his voice, Knights rapidly approached him.

"Hmm..."

"Oh, my..."

In front of Sae-Jin, two Knights, one male and the other a female, was "studying" his appearance.

"....I escaped from Monsters and hid down here. I took my clothes off after they caught on fire."

After hearing his excuses, the male Knight turned around as if he was unhappy about something, while the female Knight continued to observe his body with her face totally red. She covered her face with both of her hands as if to imply she was embarrassed, but actually, both of her eyes were busy peeking out from between her fingers.

And her observation continued a while longer until the male Knight finally told her to stop it.

< 06. The Mana Stone of a Beast (5) > Fin.

Chapter 20: The Mana Stone of a Beast (6)

After receiving the aid of those two Knights, Sae-Jin was able to safely leave the sewers.

"Oh, so your profession is a Hunter?"

However, a slightly irritating problem had developed. Although he wasn't particularly hurt anywhere, the female Knight still dragged him to an emergency ward, and after placing him in one of the sick beds, she plopped down next to him and began asking an endless stream of questions while her black-spotted yellow ears atop her head busily twitched this way and that.

"...Yes."

Since he wanted to leave as soon as possible, he kept his answers brief, but this woman showed no signs of giving up at all. She even came real close to his side and openly started sniffing him out. As expected, it was his nice body odour causing the problem. To a Soo-in that desired a pleasant body scent over that of good looks, the aroma of a wolf would probably be no different than an irresistible pheromone.

"So that's how it is. I happen to be a Mid Tier Knight, you know. On top of that, I'm a person with an excellent future prospect, too. And my annual salary is pretty high, as well... Ehehehe. We should go out hunting together some time. I'm a Leopard type, I'll have you know. I'm really fast and sturdy."

Khwoung~ She made an adorable roar and tried very hard to get into Sae-Jin's good books.

Honestly speaking, he didn't feel bad at all. No, he felt rather freaking great. Because, this lady Knight was a stunner. Contrary to her sharp, leopard-like facial features, her actions were cute like a puppy dog's and that helped a lot with how he was feeling right now.

"Ah, you just smiled. That means you'll go out with me, right? We are, right~? You won't regret it! I'll help you raise your ranks by a couple of Tiers in no time!!"

"...Ahaha, no, I'm..."

As they conversed, the atmosphere bloomed in pink colour, but out of nowhere a proverbial dark cloud loomed over their heads. And that was the other male Knight who found Sae-Jin. His face convulsing intermittently, he spoke in a tone that indicated how completely displeased he was at the moment.

"Mister Kim Sae-Jin?"

"....What is it that you want now?"

The male Knight definitely called for Sae-Jin but it was the woman who replied instead in a prickly manner, blocking him at the same time.

"You, go away. Mister Sae-Jin, you are feeling okay, no? Unfortunately, there are a lot of other injured civilians crying out in pain as we speak. If you are okay, then...."

"What do you mean, he's okay?! Can't you see he's suffered a lot? Even his clothes got burnt!! We don't know if he's suffering from some kind of emotional trauma right now."

No freaking way. Sae-Jin chuckled in slight awkwardness as he raised his body.

"I'm fine. Since I'm okay, I should get going. There are promises I need to keep, too."

"Eh? Why? It's okay if you stayed a bit longer.... oh, that's right!!"

She grabbed the rising shoulders of Sae-Jin and forcibly pushed him down on the bed. Then she shot the pestering male Knight a sharp glare. But the dude was pretending to know nothing while whistling leisurely. "No, Miss Knight, it's just that..."

"It's Rozen. Call me in the form you feel most comfortable."

"Okay, Miss Rozen, I am thankful for everything you've done for me, but I really have to get going now."

It was indeed pleasant to receive the undivided attention of a good woman. But, to a person like him that never experienced proper love all his life, such focus felt a bit foreign and uncomfortable, plus there was the restriction of time factoring in his mind as well.

"...If, if that's the case, then please give me your phone number!!"

Seeing his unshakeable resolution, the flustered Miss Rozen grabbed hold of his collars and handed over her phone. (TL: something like the image at the end of the chapter....) Sae-Jin just couldn't find it in himself to refuse her on this one so he gave her the numbers and said his goodbye.

"Please, please let's go out on a hunt together later!!"

Rozen sounded like she wanted to play online games with him and that made Sae-Jin chuckle softly. There was no meaning behind the smile, though. But her face remained deep shade of red as she longingly gazed his back.

"....Ah. Oi, you wanna die? What the heck were you trying to pull? You pickin' a fight to death with me, a wild leopard, or something?!"

As soon as Sae-Jin was far away, Rozen's face crumpled and began throwing sharp words at the male Knight. But his lips arched slightly upwards as if he was satisfied about something.

"What are you on about? I was just following protocol. He wasn't even injured. Why should he take up a bed?"

"You, today, you..."

For a while after that, she continued to spit out nonstop verbal insults at him.

*

Sae-Jin walked past the emergency ward, scanning various injured civilians there. There was a guy with serious burns covering up his entire body, while another had slight bruising on the skin.

And as he observed the injuries of the patients, a strange and painful sensation assaulted his eyes all of a sudden.

"Eeuk..."

Leaking out a soft groan, he massaged his temples, while squeezing shut his eyes before opening them.

Then, the world had changed. It was an illusion brought on by the scope of his eyesight widening to an unrealistic level.

A normal person's field of view was 180 degrees. But Sae-Jin could see what was happening behind him as well. And the whole world seemed richer in hue and brighter too. The light from the bulbs stung his eyes, and there were no longer any dark corners he couldn't see.

He stopped moving and stood there like a rock and surveyed the surroundings until he caught a distant reflection of himself in the mirror mounted on a wall of the ward.

The colour of his eyes had changed to a hue of eerie golden shade.

[Condition Complete: Sense at least ten cases of negative aura at once while maintaining the Ebony Wolf Form,]

- ▶ Passive Skill "Eyes of the Wolf" has been acquired.
- The host's eyesight has been widened and not affected by the obstruction from light. Also, the host will be able to discern what is normally invisible to naked eyes.
 - It's possible to activate this skill during Forms other than the

Ebony Wolf Form.

It was another message saying that he had acquired a new skill.

'Discern what is normally invisible?'

His query was quickly answered. There were some sort of strange, ominous-feeling strands of aura dancing above the moaning patients. There were so many colours – blue, green, purple, red, even black. Sae-Jin was actually able to discern these strands of "light", with different colours potentially denoting severity of each injury.

As if he got possessed by a spirit or something, Sae-Jin approached one of the patients letting out this mysterious aura. He dazedly stared at this light strand before suddenly recalling a message he had read before.

'When the skill level is raised, the "corporeal", "incorporeal" and even aura can be exterminated.'

If that was true... no, he was certain.

The Wolf's claw could cut away this illness as well.... After nervously swallowing down his saliva, Sae-Jin placed his hand at the faintly rising aura and swiped at it with his nails.

SFX for slicing the air and fingers flailing around

But there was no change.

'Is my Skill Level too low?'

As if to match his thoughts, the system responded once more.

[The Skill Proficiency Level is too low.]

"Huh...."

He let out a groan of acceptance. That was when a nurse asked him if he was a relative of this patient; Sae-Jin shook his head no, and then he left the emergency ward as if he was making a quick getaway. Until now, he could stay as a human for only 2 hours in a day but now, Sae-Jin found himself with a huge surplus of time. The first thing he did was to head to the one room apartment he had rented on the outskirts of the city. For the last 2 months, he was far too busy living as a Monster, so he couldn't even tell the landlord he was moving out.

"....It's been a while."

A single room in a shabby building, 3rd floor, no. 302. Slightly overcome with nostalgia, Sae-Jin slowly stroked the metal gate. The place's only security feature was a numberpad style door lock, not a fingerprint nor a retina scanner.

BbipBbipBbip

The door opened after he entered the four digit code, and he stepped over the doorsill, entering the apartment....

"Ouch!!"

He bumped his forehead on the low-hanging upper frame of the metal gate.

In the past, there was enough gap there to pass through the metal gate... but now that his body had gotten sturdier, he didn't feel much pain. He lowered his head and entered the apartment.

"sniff sniff"

The condition of his place remained largely the same as the moment he left, but with the exception of dust that had settled down everywhere. Even though it'd been empty for only 2 months, scents of a person living here had all disappeared without a trace now.

"Mm?"

As he was checking out his home, he spotted a blue light leaking out from his home phone, meaning there were recorded voice messages to listen to. Wondering just who could have left him messages, as something like this had never happened before, he soon thought of one reason for them.

Hazeline. Sae-Jin was asleep for nearly 3 days inside the sewer, and when he asked for the date after waking up, he learned that already 4 days had passed by. Since there was no way he'd call someone during that time, the only possibility left was Hazeline calling him nonstop as he owed her a lot of money.

Feeling apologetic, he quickly accessed the voice messages. There was a total of five recordings.

– "Mister Sae-Jin? This is Hazeline speaking. I was shocked to find out there was an incident of Monster Outbreak in Seoul.... I perused the list of the deceased but didn't see your name on it. You must've made it out okay. When things have settled down, please give me a call."

The first message was comparatively calm, and exactly 12 hours later, there was another one.

- "Has everything settled down? I haven't heard from you yet. The reports say the incident is now more or less under control.... I guess you're still busy? If you get this voice message, please call me."

The next message was 14 hours later, and her voice in the message was audibly trembling with worry.

- "Mister Sae-Jin? Where are you? Let me come and see you. I think, maybe we need to meet and talk? Also, that Mana Stone was a lot more expensive than the initial estimates. It was over \$4.5 million. Even if you sell all the potions here, after deducting tax and other stuff, it's only about half of that amount. So, please... Haaa, Mister Sae-Jin. Mister Sae-Jin? Please give me a call as soon as you hear this message."

Sae-Jin listened to the next message as sweat drops formed on his

forehead.

- "Mister Kim Sae-Jin. I hope you are not planning to run away using this Outbreak as an excuse. I sincerely wish that you don't even think of entertaining such a foolish idea. You may not be aware of this, but I have a bit of fame in certain circles. Finding a single person isn't even a challenge for me. You even gave me your name, too.... Wait a second, that is your real name, right? Wait, what if he gave me a fake name?! Oh, no, that's why!! I thought it was weird that an alchemist was giving away his name too easily... Fuu. I can still find you. No, I will find you. I will chase you down to the ends of this earth, no, even to hell itself. You better believe that."

Now it was rage. Her voice itself was boiling with anger, and somewhere in the middle, there were several instances of pronunciation of words being messed up after she gritted her molars hard. Sae-Jin sighed weakly as he listened to the final message.

- "Mister Sae-Jin. Yesterday I was distraught with emotions so I couldn't help it. I'm sure you can understand where I'm coming from. If you think about how more than half of your fortune that you worked so hard to accumulate in your entire life just flying away.... you wouldn't be able to sleep at night. You'd be angry and sad, wondering why your money had suddenly grew wings and flew away... I feel like that. To me, past 4 days felt like 3 years. And you also know this, don't you? Dark Elves don't easily trust banks so we mostly keep hard cash. Me, I don't have any other assets. You must not run away without repaying that debt. I've shed so much tears and blood earning that money.... Please, please, just give me a call."

Her heavy, emotional voice became desperately tearful towards the end.

As soon as the last message played out, Sae-Jin quickly called her.

Hazeline answered the phone even before the first beep finished ringing.

- "Hello?!"
- "Ah, it's me."
- "Wha....."

Hearing his voice, on the other side of the line Hazeline was letting out a long sigh of relief. She continuously mumbled "Thank god, oh thank god..." several times, so Sae-Jin started talking first.

"I'm truly sorry. As you have expected, I got embroiled in the Outbreak. And I lost my mobile phone. That's why I ended up calling you so late..."

- "No, no, it's fine, it's all fine. No, I'm very thankful instead. Actually, I was expecting the worst, at least for about one year, to be honest, but you called me after only four days.... Where are you now? Let us meet."

"Ah, the thing is...."

At her suggestion, he studied the reflections of his face and body in the mirror for a moment.

Kim Sae-Jin in Human Form, and Kim Sae-Jin in the Ebony Wolf's Human Mode seemed similar, but they were actually like two completely separate entities. The latter's face was similar to "normal" Sae-Jin's, but there were different points as well. Firstly, the lines of his face were sharper, and the features were now better defined, too. To put it another way, his previous puppy dog-like face had morphed into a keener, wolf-like visage.

Hell, even the Human Form Sae-Jin was different from the normal human Sae-Jin before the change. Maybe it was because of the sudden explosive increase in his stats, his bone mass and the overall body size also grew by a lot.

Simply put, comparing the numbers of the Human Form and the

Human Mode went like this:

The Human Form Kim Sae-Jin was 179 cm tall, weight of 77 kgs and the body in a pretty d**n good shape, while the Sae-Jin in the Human Mode exceeded 189 cm in height and all of his 100kgs were mostly of muscles, making his body no different from a living weapon.

'There will be problems if we meet like this.'

Of course, since he always wore the hood over his head when he met her so his facial appearance wasn't a problem, but the issue was his hulking frame. Whatever "mode" he chose to go with, he became just too d**n big.

"Let's meet up at a later date. How about a week from today? There is a potion I'm making right now. I can't vacate the private workshop as I am on the cusp of achieving success."

- "Eh? Right now? What potion are you making?"

"It's...."

He hesitated for a moment or two, before wetting his lips and replied to her.

"It's a potion to become taller."

- ".....I'm sorry?"

Hazeline let out a shocked voice, and Sae-Jin ended up biting his lower lip. But it was too late now, no matter how ridiculous the lie sounded. He couldn't think of any other excuses. Since he didn't grow by just 2, 3 centimetres, but 7 for one and 17 for the other.

"I'm telling you this just in case, but I will not sell this potion. No matter what happens."

- "…"

He decided to ignore the speechless Hazeline and just keep at it with a straight face.

< 06. The Mana Stone of a Beast (6) > Fin.

Chapter 21: The Orc's Forge (1)

- Investigators are suspecting the involvement of Vampires for the Fissure's eruption, after discovering numerous skeletal remains and bodies drained of blood at the abandoned church near the eruption's point of origin. With the first Monster Outbreak in nearly 5 years as well as the sudden appearance of Vampires that hadn't been seen in recent times, the citizens are worried that... (TL: Had a real trouble with the word "구旦교회" I literally have no idea what it means, other than that it's a church. Google says it's an "old" church. In the previous chapter, there was a mention of a nameless church, so I went with "abandoned". Hope it's more or less accurate...)

In the middle of sorting out things to throw away and things to take with him, Sae-Jin's eyes were pulled towards the images coming out of an old TV. It was a news about the suspected reappearance of the Vampires.

""

He unconsciously held tighter the photo frame in his hand after seeing that news. It contained his one and only family photograph. Taken the day before he lost his mother, it was a memento now stuck in the boundary between nostalgia and an old, unhealed wound; this faded photograph signified the final day of his childhood he had shared with her.

When he thought back to that day, perhaps she must have sensed her own death approaching. That day, the one before what they packaged it as an "unfortunate accident". He remembered her unusually bright, yet somehow, unusually sorrowful face. She took the photo with her young son and had the frame made, and in the following morning, she left home for work – and never came back.

Officially, at least, they said it was a car accident. But even in his young age, Sae-Jin suspected something was amiss. If it was indeed

a car crash, then her body would not have been that clean, nor would she be that pale. When they were putting her inside the casket, she seemed to be in a deep, peaceful slumber instead.

But whatever the case might have been, there was nothing he could do at that time. He was just a 7 year old, recently orphaned kid back then.

– Since the government declared the "war on Vampires" 18 years ago, all Vampires had temporarily hidden from the world, but this incident serves as a proof that they still operate in underground societies....

Sae-Jin bit his lip without realising it. They were just stinking bats, or maybe just trash, or something much worse than that, like pieces of excrement utterly devoid of any redeeming qualities whatsoever. Because they lived off human blood as their sole food source, Vampires just could not coexist with the rest of humanity. Actually, it wasn't like humanity acted inconsiderately towards them; not at all. But it was they who betrayed the mankind with a reasoning of "animal blood is unfit." (TL: literally said "animal blood is unclean." Thought that under the context, unfit sounded more correct.)

And now, those motherf*cking bat bastards were acting up again...

Sae-Jin clenched his fist and stared at his reflection in the mirror.

The kid from 15 years ago who only knew how to cry was not there anymore.

Orcs were truly special Monsters in that their individual ways of life were remarkably different depending on their rankings.

Orcs and Orc Warriors found in the Lowest to Low Tier Hunting grounds never formed packs. They lived lonely lives, only meeting others out of necessity to copulate and to proliferate. So, they didn't use any weapons, and if they did, it was only to the extent of wielding crude wooden things.

But the story changed for Orcs found in low Mid Tier Hunting ground or higher. They were similar in a way to Goblins in that these Orcs gathered in large numbers to form villages, but the difference was that their roles had been clearly divided.

Orc Scouts with their quick feet, searching for the locations of drinkable water and sustenance; Orc Warriors and Orc Jaguars for hunting according to the intel gathered by the Scouts, or to fight other Monsters, Knights and Hunters; Orc Great Warriors that safeguarded the village after having accrued experience and wisdom; And the Orc Chieftain that governed the village itself.

"Hey, wait a sec, is that...?"

"Shh!! You're right. It's an Orc village."

Unfortunately, compared to the level of danger posed, an Orc's remains didn't fetch a high price. Ignoring the rankings, a lone Orc Great Warrior possessed enough power to fight evenly against a Knight of at least an upper Mid Tier ranking and above.

But even then, the Knights Orders would still raid the village of Orcs with an unmatched madness.

There was only one reason for this - the "Orc's Forge."

"Today's luck is pretty good. Mark the position in the GPS and let's vamoose, pronto."

"Okay. But dude, that's almost a mid-sized village, so how much would it be worth to them?"

Within an Orc village, there existed several rudimentary smithies.

One could say that the main job of Orcs living in a village could very well be weaponsmiths, as they individually crafted their own weapons to use. That was the reason why the degree of weapons' completion differed from an Orc Warrior, an Orc Jaguar and to a Great Orc Warrior.

However, as an Orc's smithing skills got better the higher its ranking was, those creatures living without a village down by the Lowest and Low Tier Hunting grounds, as well as those in the villages found within the low Mid Tier hunting ground where the skill levels weren't as impressive, they did not garner much unwanted attention to themselves.

"I hear the boys at the Dawn Knights Order pay the best; last time, they paid plus minus \$440K."

But right now, the Orc village these Hunters were looking at were located in the Mid Tier Hunting ground. Weapons wielded by the Orc Jaguars were far superior than those made by the regular blacksmiths, and the stuff crafted by the likes of a Great Warrior or a Chieftain would be comparable to those made by master craftsmen, or even exceed them in some cases.

And so, the Knights Orders raided the Orc villages in order to acquire these weapons. Obviously, that was because quality weapons were very important to Knights. Even more so, in the case of those possessing excellent Magic Strength. But it wasn't some selfish, simplistic reasoning of "better weapons make you stronger". If a weapon's quality wasn't up to scratch compared to a Knight's Magic Strength, then the weapon wouldn't be able to endure the strain and get destroyed instead.

Currently, the number of Knights ranked upper Mid Tier or higher present in South Korea was around 2500, but the weapons suitable for their levels were estimated to be less than 2000. It meant that, every time 500 or so Knights go out to battle Monsters, they would end up being heavily injured after their weapons were rendered useless in the middle of the fight. It was not possible to import weapons from overseas either, since other countries were also under similar sort of situations as well.

So, most Knights Orders placed a fat reward moolah on finding Orc's Forges. Especially the Dawn Knights Order, as they were in quite a desperate position. They might be flush with cash, but somehow, found themselves urgently lacking in quality weapons.

"I finished marking it in GPS. Let's quickly..."

But there existed a definite reason why the Knights Orders placed such high bounties on finding an Orc's Forge.

Orcs living in the Mid Tier hunting ground placed high importance on the safety of their villages, and could pick up on any minute disturbance as if they were equipped with a high tech radar.

- "Khwoererer!!"

The mountain side seemed to faintly tremble at the angry roar.

"That effing son of a....!!"

The 2 Hunters ran hard without even glancing back once. That roar most likely would have been from a Chieftain ordering other Orcs around. If those Orcs were chasing after them, then...

- KwangKwangKwangKwang!!

As expected, the foresight of upper Mid Tier Hunters proved to be correct. With dust clouds and weeds flying everywhere, 4 furious Orcs leapt out of the village and began chasing them down. Unfortunately, since the Hunters couldn't utilise Mana, it was not possible to escape from their hot pursuit. (TL: the author used a term "형형한" to describe the state of the chasing Orcs. It could mean "agitated", "boiling", etc, so I went with furious. Incidentally, Google said it stands for "Bro, bro." I loled hard.)

"Do not stop!!"

The Hunters never lost hope amidst this hopeless situation and continued to run hard, but it seemed the heavens had abandoned them as they ended up encountering an even bigger source of despair.

"....Huh."

That black shape in the tall grasses – at first, it was blurry and hard to tell what its identity was. But as soon as they got close enough, Hunters could see just what it was.

It was the legendary creature that shouldn't be here – the Werewolf. The two Hunters lost all strength in their legs and plummeted to the ground after seeing the bipedal Wolf monster.

'What a serious bother...'

At the same time, Sae-Jin sighed out as he alternated his gaze between the 2 Hunters squatting on the ground and the 4 chasing Orc Jaguars. He came here in a hurry after catching a thick smell of Orcs, but once more, humans were getting in the way.

As this was the Mid Tier hunting ground, it seemed that Hunters had invested a lot in their equipment, and there were more than a few folks using magical items that eliminated all body odours – making encounters like these a troublesome affair for Sae-Jin. Already, he had run into humans 3-4 times this week alone and as a result, the rumours of a Werewolf roaming the Mid Tier hunting ground had spread online on the Hunters Cafe like a wild fire.

"....F, f*ck... Why a d**n Werewolf..."

Fortunately for him, though, those 4 Orc Jaguars would be enough to fill his daily hunting quota. Ignoring the Hunters drowning in the swamp of despair, Sae-Jin kicked with both of his legs and jumped up in the air. The black beast shot up high as if to block out the blue sky above and then, descended towards the Orc Jaguars below.

From his sturdy body, the evidence of the skill "Warrior of Reversal" being activated could be seen as a simmering red aura.

- "Kkwe-Eck!!"(TL: it's a SFX for a pig's squeal. I tried my best here...)

First, using the claws that were harder than steel, he pierced the neck of one Orc. After its throat got ripped open, the Orc died on the spot, but there were still 3 more to go.

Sae-Jin took a powerful swipe with his arm at the head of another Orc. The head separated from the body and bounced away like a basketball.

Not even scared by the sight of their 2 comrades falling in the blink of an eye, the remaining Orcs focused solely on attacking him. Receiving the implied orders of "eliminate all trespassers" from the Chieftain, there were no other purposes in these Orc Jaguar's lives other than to carry it out. (TL: slightly stumped by this line. The author used "암시" here, which kind of means "to allude, to imply." But in this line, it didn't make much sense to me.)

- "Kwoerererer!!"

An Orc roared out and struck the beast's arm with a square iron hammer.

Honestly speaking, Sae-Jin didn't expect the blow to hurt him. The body of the Beast Mode was several degrees tougher than steel, after all.

"....!! Gwoarararar!!" (TL: seriously, these roaring SFXs are driving me up the walls.)

However, contrary to his expectations, it hurt like crazy. Enough to make him almost cry, even.

Riding on the wave of his anger, Sae-Jin grabbed hold the neck of the offending Orc. As the blood drained out of its green face, the remaining Orc tried to save its comrade and attacked him.

Ppuck!!

Simple, and powerful sound of impact – Sae-Jin swung the body of the Orc in his hand and struck the head of the other one, killing them both at the same time.

'Still hurts like hell.'

After finishing the fight, Sae-Jin turned around while rubbing the arm struck by the hammer. He was half expecting to see the 2 Hunters to sit there dazedly looking at him, but no, they had already made their hasty retreat from the scene, leaving only a cloud of dust behind.

"Oh?"

Not giving up on their lives even when struck down by the momentary terror. As expected, something was different about the upper Mid Tier Hunters. Admiring their quick wits, Sae-Jin walked towards the bodies of the Orc Jaguars. And while frowning, he inserted his claw into the heart of one. The sensation of piercing past the flesh and touching the heart remained rather disgusting, still.

[Condition Complete: Absorb 20 Orc Jaguar Mana Stones.]

- The host can now use Orc's innate skill "the Smithing Technique."
- ►Active Skill "Orc's Smithing Technique" [Skill Proficiency Level: F]
- By synchronising Mana in the host's body with certain metals, rocks and wooden materials, their shapes can be altered at will.
- Depending on the Skill Proficiency Level, the material that has gone through the process of Smithing Technique will acquire new hardness and lightness, and also depending on the amount of Mana used, desired characteristics can be added as well. (Currently, it's impossible to bestow magic effects that are not physical in nature.)
- The skill's effects will differ depending on the values of the following Stats: Physical Strength and Magic Strength.
 - This skill can only be utilised during the Orc Form.

^{&#}x27;Hmm?'

He learned a completely unexpected skill after the absorption was finished. His head remained upright as he tried very hard to understand what those words meant.

*

– It's unknown how Orcs refine, manufacture, and forge metals even until now. The temperature of flames found in the smithies within the villages were measured to be, at most, around 1200 degrees Celsius, which is shockingly low. And it is simply impossible to explain how can the weapons manufactured by the Orcs possess such high quality by looking at that weak flame; even the modern day smithies equipped with bleeding-edge technology fail to shed light on the matter – thus, making this question perhaps THE unsolvable mystery of this generation....

Sae-Jin watched the image projected onto one of the walls in the cave with a great focus. It was a documentary titled "The World of Blacksmiths, Part 2: The Secret Wonders of Orcs". To get a better understanding of what's what, he even paid a grand total of 50 cents (USD) to rewatch the programme but hell, he instead ended up realising that humans knew only a tiny little bit regarding the true nature of Monsters.

'Synchronising the Mana inside my body...? Let's just have a go.'

Although both of his stats Mana Affinity and Magic Strength had increased a good deal, he just couldn't get to grips with the idea of utilising Mana at all. It was a par for the course, really. In order to wield Mana, rather than pure talent, an advanced education administered early on in the life played a crucial role, after all.

However, even though he might be using Mana, this wasn't a technique to utilise it, but a skill activated from 'the System'.

He changed to the Orc Form, picked up a big rock from the vicinity, and activated the skill. Suddenly, the rock was dyed in the Mana's blue colour.

"Hoh?"

That was the sound of greatest admiration possible to utter out by the layout of an Orc's mouth. Sae-Jin fondled the rock wrapped in Mana. Mysteriously, the shape of the rock changed according to his hand movement. It became a spearhead when he shaped his hands into a sharp triangle, and when he rubbed it in between his hands, it became a thick string.

At the wondrous sight of the rock morphing into different shapes like clay whenever he manipulated it, Sae-Jin lost track of time and regressed back to the days of childish innocence and curiosity. Then, maybe three minutes had gone past like that. The blue Mana infused in the rock dissipated, and its shape solidified into the final form he was making, a star.

[Smithing Technique has been completed.]

[Hardness Level: E]

[Due to the rubbish quality of the finished item, the Skill Proficiency Level has decreased to F-.]

"…?"

He was left utterly aghast by this announcement. What was supposedly wrong with his star, anyway?!

< 07. The Orc's Forge (1) > Fin.

Chapter 22: The Orc's Forge (2)

'I'm gonna go batsh*t crazy here.'

Kim Sae-Jin was in the midst of busy fondling a rock that had turned into mud clay after he synchronised it with his Mana, but then, his anger spiked up all of a sudden, causing him to angrily fling it away.

The gap between his imaginations and that of reality was just too d**n wide to cross. The human Sae-Jin's head definitely held an idea on what he wanted, and obviously he meant to do it well, but really, with the accursed clumsy hands of an Orc, it was simply The Mission: Impossible. It sure felt like he was back in the Art Class during his student days. The image was in his head, and if he drew it like this and that, then it'd work out alright; however, his villainous hands wouldn't allow him to achieve success no matter what. (TL: this last line had to be revised, as the author simply said his hands were disabled. Quite literally.)

That alone would have made him rather irritated to no end, but the message window that popped up right afterwards made his blood pressure skyrocket, even if it was only for a short while.

[The Smithing Technique has been completed.]

[Hardness Level: F]

[Due to the absolute worst quality of the finished item, the Skill Proficiency Level has decreased.]

"....Euaaaaaaakkk!!!!"

In the end, Sae-Jin reverted back to the Human Form and screamed out at the top of his lungs while grabbing his head. He wanted to smash apart that stupid message window right now, that kept on telling him his Proficiency Level would fall when it was already at the rock bottom of F-.

It had been 20 times already. And during those 20 times, only the

negative words like absolute worst, useless, disgusting appeared in the windows.

"Ha-ah...."

Even though he couldn't get anywhere remotely close to tasting success, his entire body felt lethargic and energy-less. It was a signal that his Mana supply was beginning to run dry. Sae-Jin sighed out roughly while laying down on the ground.

"…!!"

And precisely 90 seconds later, Sae-Jin suddenly shot back right up.

He felt like Archimedes sitting inside that famed bathtub of his. His eyes went round as he shouted out aloud.

"Goblin!!"

He'd activate the Smithing Technique skill in his Orc Form and infuse a rock with Mana, then change to the Goblin Form to reshape it. (This Skill could be activated only in the Orc Form but, once activated, it was possible to manipulate the shapes of objects in other Forms as the duration of the Skill only depended on the amount of Mana used up for the maintenance of the ability itself.) To combine the Orc's Smithing Technique with the excellent Goblin's Craftsmanship skill – wasn't this the greatest combination like, ever? He quickly assumed the Orc Form and grabbed a nice-sized rock from the vicinity once more. (TL: that bracketed sentence in the middle of this paragraph is from the author.)

*

"I did it..."

A Goblin with a single line of tattoo on his forehead slowly sighed in satisfaction.

[The Smithing Technique has been completed.]

[Hardness Level: E]

[Due to the excellent quality of the finished item, the Skill Proficiency Level has increased.]

It was a feel-good message. A deep grin drew up on his lips.

What he managed to make this time was a type of a dagger. A small sword made out of stone and its blade fashioned into a crescent moon. As it was crafted from a rock, it couldn't be used as a proper weapon but still, he was rather pleased with this outcome, as this was the first time since the activation of the skill he did something right....

....But then, he became dissatisfied all over again.

"Something's not right."

Kim Sae-Jin muttered to himself. His satisfaction only lasted for a fleeting moment and now, he wanted to make something even better.

This didn't mean blacksmithing was his calling, no.

Something inside him went through an inexplicable change after he absorbed the Mana Stone of the Werewolf, as well as seeing the news about the resurgence of Vampires. One could call it... an ambition. A notion he had never ever held in his poverty-stricken old life. But the Mana Stone of the beast that had now become a part of his heart, desired to make his ambitions into reality. A wolf's ambitions had completely been assimilated with his psyche, the resurgence of the Werewolf's irreconcilable enemy, Vampires, serving as the trigger.

"Hmm."

However, he was feeling a little lethargic due to the shortage of Mana to have another go immediately, so he decided to take a break first and lied down on the stone bed instead.

*

A week later, Sae-Jin had left the cave and was walking in the

middle of the city for the promised dinner with Hazeline; that was when he discovered a signboard that he wouldn't have found interesting before.

"Tae-Baek Armoury"

A weapons shop with a simple name. But the weight of that name was rather quite heavy. Tae-Baek – it was the name belonging to one of the 17 master craftsmen in South Korea. Sae-Jin became interested in the store now that he possessed a skill related to blacksmithing, but unfortunately, there wasn't a lot of time left until the meeting with the Dark Elf.

"...An Open Invitational tournament?"

So, rather than stepping inside the store, he took a closer look at the poster plastered on the display window.

[The 4th Republic of Korea Blacksmiths Open Invitational Tournament,]

An opportunity to realise the dream of the talented, aspiring Blacksmiths.

- ▶ Application requirements: Those wishing to become a blacksmith. (However, those with the level of artisan or higher are prohibited from entering.)
- ► How to participate: Physically mail the product to the address provided or visit the premise personally to apply. (Possible to participate using an alias or in anonymity.)
- ► Competition process: Preliminary screening, 1st Round of Judging, 2nd Round of Judging, and the Final a total of 4 stages. In the Final Round, audience may participate in the judging process. (New equipment must be presented for 1st, 2nd and the Final Rounds separately.)
- ► Content of awards: Total prize money of \$1 million US (TL: I've rounded up quite a bit here. The original amount was just under \$885K. Seems a bit on the low side to me, so...)

► Sponsors: Dawn Corporation, Dawn Knight Order, Hyunwol Auction House, Raven Knights Order, etc...

[We eagerly await the participation of many blacksmiths who are fervently fighting to achieve their dreams.]

The very first thought emerging in his head after he dazedly stared at the poster, was the word "debt". The debt he owed Hazeline was \$4.5 million US. And then, he thought about the house as well. Now that he could spend nearly half of a day as a human being, he would dearly love to graduate from the caveman lifestyle as soon as possible.

"....Hmm."

He glanced around to see if anyone was looking, stealthily approached the poster, and then....

Rrrrip.

He ripped the poster right off the glass and hurriedly carried it away.

*

Hazeline, who had been waiting for Sae-Jin in the restaurant, didn't even have enough time to get shocked at his increased size.

"....You brewed all these in just ten days?!"

"No, no. Took me half a year. I brought the ones I had stashed for a rainy day. More importantly, how much of the debt would they cover?"

A total of ten potion bottles. And among them, two bottles of "A Goblin's Kindness" made out of the powderised fang of a Sabretooth tiger. While Sae-Jin's expression was slightly bitter as he found it regretful to use up the remainder of the fang, Hazeline's face was full of joy and happiness.

"After deducting tax, I think around \$2.5 million, US~ So, if you add up with the potions sold previously, there's only around \$270K

left."

"Still that much... But of course..."

Their conversation was temporarily cut off. Because, the waiter had brought their food.

"Looks delicious."

Sae-Jin spoke as he stared at the thick steak. Hazeline nodded, and carefully stored the potions strewn about on the table inside her bag.

"Uhm..."

"Excuse me...."

Before grabbing the knives and forks, they opened their mouths at the same time. Sae-Jin gestured her to go ahead first, so she did.

"Well, can't you please tell me what perfume you are using right now?"

"....Huh?"

"Wait, it's not like that. I don't have any other intentions. I just like that scent, is all. I'd like to sprinkle some on me, and also to smell it in the house, too."

Hazeline scratched her cheek and coyly asked him. He made a troubled expression and shook his head.

"If that's what you want, then you should take me home. It's really not a perfume but my own odour."

"Eiiii...."

At his words, Hazeline gazed at him with a sly, knowing look. She was expecting as much. Pretending to be not interested, but in the end, wasn't this a tactic straight out of a player's handbook?

"I'd like to do that as well, but.... you also know this too, don't you? Us Dark Elves are sensitive towards our privacy. So if you find it a bit inconvenient to tell me what the perfume is, just a small hint would..."

"I'm telling you the truth. Really, it's not a perfume but my own body odour."

Sae-Jin was adamant. Hazeline's brows knitted slightly as if she found his unchanging attitude disagreeable, but still nodded her head to show that she understood, albeit reluctantly.

"I understand. Well... if you insist it is, then surely it should be."

Her lips were pushed out in a pout, and anyone could see that she was obviously upset.

"No, well, if you really want this scent in your home... then you should just take me with you."

Sae-Jin spoke jokingly after finding her rather adorable like this.

"Fu-ut. Thanks, re~ally, for your suggestion, but I'm fine."

Hazeline smiled and accepted his joke, and in this friendly atmosphere the lively conversation never once stopped. The one talking was Sae-Jin, and the one listening and laughing was Hazeline.

Perhaps, she was just trying to get on his good side, but even knowing this, oddly enough, Sae-Jin's confidence continued to soar in front of this beautiful woman. The heart that used to beat irregularly whenever they talked face to face, now remained calm, and there wasn't even a trace of nervousness in him.

Was this because the effects of "a heart of a beast" – the Werewolf's – or was it the belief in himself, in other words, confidence and pride, had grown? Whatever the reasons were, Sae-Jin was really pleased about himself right now.

"Oh, by the way, do blacksmiths make a lot of money these days?"

As the thought suddenly floated up, he slightly tested the waters. He figured that, if the Skill Proficiency Level of the Blacksmithing

Technique rose high enough, it'd be comparable to the recognised blacksmiths, no, the very best of the lot, even to that of master craftsmen. On top of that, if he combined the Goblin's Craftsmanship, he'd be able to make products that perfectly married aesthetics and functionality. It was too good a skill to not utilise it.

"If the stuff they make is good, then yes. But could it be as simple as that? You need to possess some talent with Mana if you want to climb up to a certain level in blacksmithing, but if you have enough talent to reach a level of a master, wouldn't be it better to just become a Knight, instead? It'd get rather boring just hammering away in a sweltering smithy, and as a kicker, you'd need to waste 2~3 years of your life to knock out a single decent item."

"Oh, wait a moment, please. Blacksmiths can utilise Mana?"

"Of course. Loading the hammer with Mana as they strike down on the metal apparently infuses equipment with it. And higher the amount of Mana infused into an equipment, the better. But, I mean, just what is that? Just depending on luck, is all."

Hazeline spoke in a disinterested tone, and Sae-Jin floated a deep smile of satisfaction. He now figured out the rough cause of why an Orc Great Warrior's weapon was better than an artisan's, and able to compare with a master craftsman's. Blacksmiths depended on luck, somewhat, to infuse Mana, but Orcs utilised their physical traits to directly wield Mana when forging their weapons.

"But why are you asking me about that?"

Hazeline asked him while thoroughly chewing the meat.

"...Oh, well. No particular reason. I saw a poster for a blacksmithing competition nearby. By the way, how much is it for a stuff made by an artisan or a master nowadays?"

"Their prices are seriously enormous. There was an axe that was

sold recently called the Strength of Rok-Tah. It's a weapon praised by many master craftsmen as well as rated favourably by the critics. Even the mass media played it up, saying it's a birth of a new source of pride for the country. Well, if I remember correctly, the Dawn Knights Order coughed up around \$26 million US for the privilege of taking it home."

Sae-Jin stopped his knife the moment he heard that figure.

"....I see."

He calmed his wildly beating heart and replied in a deadpan expression.

And about an hour later, Sae-Jin returned to his cave in a hurry while being seen carrying a stash of iron ingots.

He wanted to buy raw steel but alas, didn't have enough money for that.

< 07. The Orc's Forge (2) > Fin.

Chapter 23: The Orc's Forge (3)

(This extra chapter is brought to you by these brilliant and astute individuals: Mikael M, Christine W, Keneth P, Cayleb R, Tristan B, Gege S, David L, and Valentino W. Thank you for your donations!!)

[The Smithing Technique has been completed.]

[Hardness Level: D]

[Succeeded in bestowing special characteristics: "Sharpness Level C"', "Weight Reduction Level: D"]

[Due to the outstanding quality of the finished item, the Skill Proficiency Level has increased from F to D-.]

"Oww yeah..." (TL: the author didn't literally say this, but I was watching the Guardians of the Galaxy before TLing this chapter and Rocket Racoon is such a bad a*s.....)

Kim Sae-Jin in the Goblin Form murmured in satisfaction as he stroked the dagger. On the short but sharp and straight blade, an intricate pattern carved out by the 10 minutes-worth of the Goblin's exacting handicraft skills was visible, and the hilt made out of a rock was perfectly shaped, as well as also being light in weight.

Actually, he wanted to make a lengthier and more destructive weapon like a single-edged or a double-edged sword if possible; unfortunately, with his current Mana pool and the Proficiency Level, this dagger was his limit. No matter how much Mana he poured in, the Smithing Technique lasted only for 10 minutes, and it proved to be really tough trying to make anything longer than a dagger with the tiny-ass hands of a Goblin during that short period of time.

But contrary to how he felt about the process itself, he was really liking this dagger. This could be called a work of art that combined the Orc's Smithing Technique and the Goblin's Craftsmanship. Of

course, since he was the one who made it, there was a little bit of his own pride mixed in there with the evaluation, but then again, the word "outstanding" did appear for the very first time in the message window, so....

'But this is the best I can do right now.'

He would have preferred to raise his Skill Proficiency Level higher before submitting the item for the tournament, but the last day of submission was tomorrow, so it couldn't be helped. He decided that, since he'd be given another chance to craft something new after passing the preliminary round, he'd diligently raise the Level before the 1st round of judging commences.

Kim Sae-Jin changed to the human form and got up to leave.

*

"Excuse me, can you tell me how I can send types of armament via mail?"

Looking like a suspicious person while hiding a dagger in his pocket, Sae-Jin lingered around inside the post office before asking one of the employees behind a counter.

"Eh? Types of armament?"

"Yes. I wish to participate in the open invitational blacksmithing tournament."

It was as if Sae-Jin was looking down on the employee sitting on the chair as he spoke. That was because he was currently in the The Human Mode of the Ebony Wolf Form, and was 189 cm tall as a result.

"A-ha. If that's the case.... It should be here somewhere. Please, wait a moment."

The post office worker rummaged through one of the drawers and pulled out a sheet of paper. It was the application form for the tournament.

"You can mail the item after completing this form. You're entering a bit late, though? Most folks came in to apply on the first day of the application period, you know."

"Oh. Well, I was... it took a while longer to make mine. I hadn't made anything in advance like the others."

Sae-Jin sat down on a nearby empty chair. Only three things had to be written on the form – his name, his contact details, and his address. He left the name bit blank for now and filled in the rest. As for the most important "name" part, he found it somewhat burdensome to use his real name, so he jotted down an alias he thought of last night instead.

"Here, I'm finished. How much for the shipping?"

"The shipping cost is taken care of by the Blacksmiths Association."

"Oh..."

Sae-Jin nodded his head, said his thanks and left the post office.

The post office he visited was located in the city centre of Gangwon Province, so as soon as he stepped out, he was greeted by the throngs of people coming and going. Rather than returning to his cave right away, Sae-Jin blended in with the crowd and took a walk.

He wanted to fully enjoy this partial freedom he had finally earned after swimming inside the misery and despair.

- *SFX for eyes swivelling*

He could hear the sounds of people's eyes moving.

The freedom earned after the difficult struggle tasted a lot sweeter than he could've imagined. Since he possessed an eyecatching athletic physique and a sharp face of an Alpha male, the Kim Sae-Jin of now was quite a different animal altogether from his past. Unlike before, when he had given up on getting the attention of the opposite s*x, all he had to do now was to just walk around and ladies would send approving gazes towards him. He even saw someone who consciously made a fake cough and flicked her hair back.

It was, in a word, fun. Really.

"...?"

Then, out of nowhere. A strange scent invaded his nostrils. It was a smell of blood with a faint whiff of brass mixed in that was noticeably different than that of a human being. Sae-Jin turned his head this way and that, trying to locate the origin of this scent.

And soon, he found it. A normal couple, a man and a woman, outwardly not at all remarkable. But the origin of that stink of blood was definitely those two.

Sae-Jin slowly moved his feet. Hiding among the crowd, he tailed the couple. He couldn't understand why he was doing this. Only that, he was sure of the need to follow them. It must have been his instincts.

And so, in the middle of tailing them, suddenly his eyesight widened.

The skill that was woven into his primal instincts, the "Eyes of the Wolf", had seemingly activated all by itself.

In this world where every colour had gained yet another level of richness, Sae-Jin could clearly see it. From the couple, no, more correctly, an ominous aura of blood rising from the man.

'A... Vampire.'

The moment he realised this, his sanity wavered. His heart began pounding madly, and his breathing became shallow. The murderous desire of the wolf beast tried to rear its powerful head, nearly causing him to rush out and pummel that Vampire's skull into mush. But the human Sae-Jin endured it, albeit just barely.

Not yet, not yet. Need to wait a bit more. I gotta find the right opportunity to strike...

Thankfully, he didn't have to wait for long. The man grasped the hand of the woman and led her into a shabby housing area. To suck dry her blood, most likely. Seeing this, Sae-Jin also moved his feet.

*

As humans monitored the activities of Vampire species every second of the day, Vampires became very cautious when performing the rituals of blood sucking. Even though it was troublesome, they hypnotised their victims and drank the blood in indoor environments. This had become the unwritten rule for Vampires.

The male Vampire, Yu Sahng-Hyun, pulled the woman inside his home while carrying a satisfied expression. That was because, this beautiful woman under his hypnosis was about to become his own personal blood bank. For a period of 1 year, he'd suck her blood out periodically until her body rapidly withers away.

"...Lie down."

As he commanded, she showed no resistance and lied down on a bed. The sight of her wearing only a single one piece dress was quite alluring, to say the least.

He slowly approached the woman and caressed her body. From her toes to her shin, then from her shin to her thigh. Inch by inch, creeping up ever so slightly. The heightened sense of touch gave Yu Sahng-Hyun a deep chill down in his loins.

He could no longer hold back his desire and was about push down on her hard, when....

- Knock, knock.

There was a sound of someone knocking on the door. For a Vampire who had a superior sense of hearing, this was the absolute

worst form of hindrance, like, ever. Yu Sahng-Hyun's expression crumpled into an unsightly mess. (TL: c*ckblock!!)

Opening wide his bloodshot eyes, he spat out a swear word.

- Knock knock knock knock knock knock

The unknown person continued to knock from the other side of the door. The knocking had now become more aggressive than before. Enraged by this ill-timed obstruction, Yu Sahng-Hyun growled angrily and stood up. His eyes, burning with a crimson hue, contained a thick killing intent. (TL: the author said "enraged at the bad manners". Changed at my discretion.)

- Knock knock...

Before the second knock had ended, Sahng-Hyun violently jerked open the door. His original plan was to drag in whoever it was outside by the neck and rip him apart, limb by limb.

"You son of a bi... Keheuk!!"

But before he could act, a hand of a beast shot out and wrapped around his neck first.

Panicking at the sudden attack, Yu Sahng-Hyun clawed at the arm of the beast repeatedly, but he couldn't even leave a scratch mark on the black-fur covered arm.

- *SFX for a door slowly opening*

The half-open door slowly opened, revealing a single man standing there.

It was definitely a human.

That was, only after disregarding the pair of golden eyes shooting out deathly chilly gazes and the arm that was, without a doubt, belonging to a beast.

"Keeeeuk..."

Those were the final images Sahng-Hyun would get to remember. SFX for breaking bones

With a horrifying noise of something twisting up, his neck bones cracked into bits and pieces.

"

Kim Sae-Jin discarded the limp body of the Vampire as if it was trash, and closed the door behind him. He had not a single shred of guilt from taking a life. No, it was more like he had stepped on an insect instead. And if he hadn't killed this b*****d, the Vampire would have committed a murder first, so he felt totally justified for his actions that had saved a human being.

He turned his head and checked out the woman still under the hypnosis of the Vampire. Fortunately, it seemed like no harm was done to her yet, as she was simply unconscious, only her clothing was in somewhat of a half dishevelled state.

There was no other particular smell beside the dead Vampire and the woman in this place, so he reverted his arm back to that of a human's. This was one of the ways to use the Beast Mode/Human Mode he had uncovered recently, where he could change a part of his body to that of a Beast's.

Sae-Jin explored the rest of the house. Whether it was due to the house being so shabby, he couldn't spot any CCTV cameras inside or out.

'She'll probably call the cops later.'

Satisfied, Sae-Jin took one last look at the unconscious woman, and exited the house.

And precisely 3 hours later. Waking up from the hypnosis, the woman screamed at the top of her lungs before calling the cops.

Located in front of the Seoul City Hall, was the Blacksmiths

Association. Inside this three-storied, plain-looking building, people were busy sorting out all the submitted armaments for the open invitational tournament.

"I wonder, will there be anything interesting this time? The best item we got from the last tournament ended up being ranked only around Mid Quality tier."

The Highest Knight from the Raven Order, Kim Yu-Rin, asked as she eyed the sorting out process. The Association's Chairman standing next to her meaningfully nodded his head.

"It should be okay to expect something good this time around. Firstly, the smithies in the Busan and Gwangju areas are participating en masse, and the direct disciple of the Master Kim Tae-Baek also sent in his work, saying he'd like to enter as well. Perhaps, it's too much to expect a Branded Product but, it's possible that we might find some High Quality Goods."

"Oh, is that true?"

Master craftsmen were rather particular about choosing their disciples. Several masters didn't even bother to have one, and the others would have no more than 1 or 2 at most. The government begged these masters with the promise of a greater level of support if they even as much as showed a hint of raising a disciple or two, but their stubbornness simply knew no bounds.

"Of course. We let them go through the Preliminary already. I'll introduce you to them at a later date."

"A direct disciple of that stubborn Master Kim Tae-Baek.... Perhaps, is that person who I think he is?"

"Mm. Your thoughts are on the money. That hot-headed geezer would've never taken in a disciple, unless it's his own flesh and blood, no? A 19-year-old flesh and blood, that is."

Kim Yu-Rin peeked a smile at the dissatisfied voice of the Chairman.

"But didn't he abandon the first born, saying he didn't have any talent? I hear he's the last born – his talent must be quite amazing." (TL: the gender of the disciple is not revealed in the raw at this time. Will continue with a "he" until the author clears that up.)

"That's also true as well. Sent in a sword but, whew, it's rather quite good."

As the two of them conversed, the last day for submission was eventually coming to an inevitable close.

"This is the last one!"

And finally. One of the employees shouted as he raised a metal box.

"Can I take a look too?"

"Not a problem. But it'll be better to not expect much. Since products sent in from all the well known smithies had gone through already, it's probably something not very impressive."

"Yes, I'm also aware. But still, it is the final one, so I'd like to be there."

"Alright."

The Chairman smiled magnanimously and nodded his head.

"Hey, you over there! Hold it!! Miss Yu-Rin wishes to see it too!" (TL: Uhm, the author, for some reason, wrote the line like this: "Baby, better wait for a second!" I'm like, wut)

"Eh, huh? Oh, yes, of course!"

The employee stayed his hands from opening the box and quickly sat up straight.

And people started to gather around the desk with the box on top. Not because the employees were interested in seeing the weapon with a potentially low quality, but obviously, to be around the crazily beautiful Knight Kim Yu-Rin's presence.

"Shall I open it?"

"Yes. Please go ahead."

After Yu-Rin had spoken, the employee carefully opened the box.

At that moment the box opened. The light from the lightbulb got reflected by the blade and stabbed the eye of the employee.

"Euk!!"

Ignoring the employee who was busy rubbing his eyes, Kim Yu-Rin and the Chairman took a look inside the box.

"....Huh?"

A stunned gasp leaked out from between the lips of Kim Yu-Rin. The only reason why she wanted to see this item was because it happened to be the very last one submitted to the tournament and thus had some sort of ceremonial significance. In other words, she also didn't hold any high expectations either.

However.... inside this box was an unexpectedly good item. Outwardly, it could be called an ornamental dagger thanks to all the intricate carvings, but the sharp aura of Mana infused into the short blade was simply out of the norm.

The cold, grey blade seemed keen enough to slice anything it comes in contact with; the beautiful patterns on the surface and the smooth, clean hilt roused the flames of greed inside her, wanting to possess this dagger.

""

Yu-Rin dazedly reached out and grasped the hilt. It didn't feel foreign at all, and she could hold it so comfortably, as if it was a part of her own body. This familiarity showcased that this dagger was meticulously designed with the physiology of the user in mind.

"....It seems that, we might have another good product in our hands."

The Chairman, also dazed like Yu-Rin, muttered while admiring

the dagger.

"Oi, what's the name of the participant?"

At the Chairman's words, one of the employees, who were also stunned into silence by the dagger, hurriedly woke up and fished out the application form inside the box.

"....What the?"

"...Why? Something wrong?"

"Ah, no, that is... the name is a bit strange, sir. It's The Orc's Forge – and the sender wishes to be called Orc in the shortened form."

At this terrible name, the Chairman's brows narrowed. Although they did approve the usage of aliases as well as anonymity for this competition, but to use a Monster's name....

"It must be a hot trend nowadays, using the names of Monsters on their products. I mean, there's the Goblin Alchemist and stuff."

Kim Yu-Rin smiled brightly as if she found this a pleasant surprise.

"And... well, since Orcs are known to make good weapons, I think it's rather a fitting name. Excuse me, Mister Chairman?"

"Mmm?"

"Rather than the disciple of Master Tae-Baek, can you arrange a meeting with this Mister Orc for me? What he wrote does sound a bit strange.... but I really like this weapon. If I build a personal connection with this person, I think he'll make me an excellent weapon later on." (TL: The 2nd sentence in this paragraph confused me greatly as well. I tried to make sense of it and thus didn't try to do a literal TL of the line.)

Hearing her request, the Chairman scratched the back of his head but in the end, nodded his head as if he couldn't help it anyway.

"If that's what you want... I'll try my best. But before that, we

should test this dagger first. It's possible that an artisan or a master could be playing a prank here after deliberately lowering the quality of their work."

"Yes, of course. Well, thank you for your help, Mister Chairman."

< 07. The Orc's Forge (3) > Fin.

Chapter 24: The Orc's Forge (4)

(This extra chapter is brought to you by these brilliant and astute individuals: Mikael M, Christine W, Keneth P, Cayleb R, Tristan B, Gege S, David L, and Valentino W. Thank you for your donations!!)

Ten days following the submission of his dagger to the Blacksmiths tournament, Sae-Jin maintained a regimented lifestyle.

In the mornings, he practised Alchemy and Blacksmithing Technique, and in the afternoons, he went downtown to take a break. Even though he called it a break, it was nothing more than him walking around the city's streets aimlessly. But that was enough to put his mind at ease.

And at nights, when the number of Hunters and Knights were few and far in between, he hunted Monsters in the low Mid Tier and Mid Tier hunting grounds. Most of the time, he hunted in his Ebony Wolf Form's Beast Mode, but sometimes, he deliberately went out in the Orc Form too. He did that in order to evolve. Well, the thing was... he ran into a particularly tough wall while performing the Smithing Technique.

[As an "Orc Warrior", Hardness Level: D and the Skill Proficiency Level: D is the maximum attainable limit.]

Unfortunately, though – no matter how many Monsters he hunted, the Orc Warrior showed no sign of evolving.

"Fuu..."

Right now, the time was 11 am. Sae-Jin put the mortar and pestle down after making three bottles of potions. He'd been grinding herbs for so long now, the Goblin's tiny little hands were all swollen up in red and everything.

The potion-crafting proved to be a cumbersome and difficult endeavor. Even though he was blessed with the Goblin's

Craftsmanship skill, it's Proficiency Level was still low; and to repeatedly refine ingredients as well as to compound them to the minute, exacting degree, a great deal of his mental strength and focus was required.

[Crafting of the Element Resistance potion has failed. Skill Proficiency Level will be increased.]

He often encountered failure whenever he tried to concoct difficult potions. Just as its high price suggested, the Element Resistance potion was difficult as hell to make. This was his fourth try today, but he hadn't succeeded once. Right about now, he was seriously missing the powder of Sabre-tooth tiger's fang as that thing not only doubled as a Mana Stone but also could greatly bolster the success rate of potion-crafting.

"Haa...."

As he tasted yet another defeat, the strength abandoned him in droves. And the lightheadedness from inhaling the fumes of the ingredients belatedly began to assault him, too.

For the sake of taking a break, Sae-Jin changed to the Human Mode of the Wolf Form and switched on the TV. Without a doubt, proper resting or playing needed to be done in a human's body. Of course, just by being inside this stupid cave, the level of enjoyment he'd derive would be halved – no, maybe even worse than that, but still.

- Precisely 10 days ago, a man's body was discovered in one of the Gangwon Province's rental houses. The victim had died instantly after his neck bones were twisted, and on his neck, imprints of unidentifiable animal claws were discovered. The crack team of detectives investigated the case using that evidence as the lead off point, until they announced that they have made a surprising discovery. As to what that exact discovery is, can you inform us, Professor Kim?

It was a programme related to currently trending news topics.

Taking the already happened event as its topic of discussion, the chat show let the anchor and a panel of so-called experts talk about stuff and present information to the viewers. Sae-Jin's ears had to perk up from this show's contents, since it was definitely related to what he had done.

- Thank you. Well, the identity of our victim just so happens to be that of a Vampire. This fact was uncovered by the investigators after they had fast tracked the autopsy. The decision came about after hearing the peculiar testimony of the first person to find the body, as well as the discovery of several blood packs inside the fridge of the victim.

This incident has ignited fierce debate among the public. On one side, there are those arguing that the Vampires are a sub-species of humans so the perpetrator must be caught and punished, while the other side is opposing that view by arguing that Vampires are the enemies of mankind to be exterminated and thus there's no need to investigate this matter any further.

Also, there are arguments regarding whether the culprit knew the identity of the victim as a Vampire and thus committed this act or not....

Sae-Jin subconsciously leaked a mocking grin. Even after suffering at the hands of these damnable Vampires, there still seemed to be morons busy yapping on about respecting the f*cking human rights of these bloodsuckers. No, at this point, he had to suspect whether Vampire sleeper cells had infiltrated the human society and what not.

Bump.

It was then, as he thought up to this point, his heart suddenly felt like it was going to explode. The insatiable thirst for murder assaulted his brain, telling him to track down every single one of these bastards and massacre them all.

It was a poisonous and powerful hatred born out of the deeply

rooted hostility Sae-Jin carried in his heart combining with the primal instincts of the Werewolf.

"…!!"

And that's when he discovered himself busy destroying the floor of his cave with both of his arms changed to that of a Werewolf's. This.... was weird. Totally spooked by this.... event, he quickly assumed the Human Form and flipped the channel.

"Fuu."

His heart had calmed down somewhat by doing that, but his rage towards Vampires wouldn't cool down so easily. Sae-Jin concentrated hard on the TV in order to appease this boiling anger. Luckily enough, his attention was grabbed by a very interesting program on the channel he changed to.

– A total number of 33 workshops and 1308 blacksmiths have entered in this year's 4th Blacksmiths Open Invitational Tournament.

He remembered hearing that every step of the selection processes by the judges would be televised. And during the Final Round of judging, over one thousand audience members would participate in finding the winner that possessed the mass market appeal and also, was acknowledged by the professional users.

– The previous tournament's Preliminary saw only 100 participants making it through, but this year, 208 people have managed to reach this stage, ensuring that we will be blessed with a fierce competition to determine the eventual winner. And right here, inside the main headquarter of the Dawn Knights Order, 20 items selected from those 208 participants are on display. The accomplished Knights will lend us their expert opinions on judging these items.... Oh, here they are!

Sae-Jin wondered if his dagger was among those on display and looked closer, only to let out a small gasp of surprise after seeing

the face of one of the Knights there trying to play the roles of judges.

– To start off the proceedings, we secured the aid of someone that was very difficult to get a hold of. Welcome, the Knight of the Dawn Order, Miss Yu Sae-Jung!!

It was her, the girl Sae-Jin saved from the Troll way back when.

- Oh... yes, hello to you as well.
- I heard that last week, you were promoted to the ranks of low Mid Tier. Now that you are the reigning record holder of the youngest low Mid Tier Knight ever in history, how do you feel right now?
-I'm not sure. But as I've agreed to do this 1st Round thing, I would like to concentrate only on judging for now.

*

The Dawn Knights Order got the first dibs on acquiring a single weapon after every round of judging process, thanks to being the biggest sponsor of the tournament.

Obviously, as this was just the 1st Round, even the armaments rated Low Quality would still be rare. But it was still possible to identify the "good seedlings" from early on. That's why Yu Sae-Jung volunteered and said she wanted to participate in the judging process. She still hadn't found a weapon that could be called her "primary" just yet.

She already had a sword rated High Quality that other low Mid Tier Knights wouldn't even be able to think about touching, but for the granddaughter of the Dawn Corporation's Chairman, it simply wasn't satisfactory enough for both her and her grandpa.

"Haha. Well, then. Please score these 20 weapons on display here after giving them your considered opinions, Miss Sae-Jung. The scores you give them will be combined with the scores from other judges and the winners will be decided from that, so please give it

your best!!"

Normal equipment used by the Knights were divided into the ranking system of [Lowest \rightarrow Low \rightarrow Mid \rightarrow High \rightarrow Highest] in that order. And on the very top, there were those that exceeded these classifications and achieved the ranks of a "Branded Goods" or a "Treasure." (TL: this is the first time the author has clarified one of his ranking systems. Hooray!! And BTW, the Treasure ranking is a literal TL from the raw. We can probably expect that the other ranks and Tiers work on the same classification system.)

So, a Low Tier Knight would use a Low Quality equipment, and low Mid and Mid Tiers would use up to the Mid Quality. And the Knights of upper Mid Tiers and above, needed at least the High Quality weapons or better. (Of course, this changed slightly depending on the level of the Knights Orders.) (TL: this bracketed sentence is from the author.)

"Will do."

Yu Sae-Jung walked with heavy footsteps and took a look at the weapons arranged in a row. Her judging was super quick and rather strict as well. One look, and she gave 2 points, another quick look, then a single point awarded – this repeated for a couple of times. The maximum possible points that could be awarded was 10.

".....Pardon me, but if you could just tell us what's on your mind..."

In a clearly restless manner, the announcer exhorted Sae-Jung who was too busy stabbing the hearts of the blacksmiths countrywide with a lethal blade while not saying a single word.

"Oh, my apologies. It's my first time being on TV."

She quickly lowered her head, and then pointed at the item she gave a single point to, just now.

"That sword is too malleable to be of any use. It's the lower than the lowest quality that wouldn't even leave behind a cut on the bones of a Skeleton. That's why it's only worth one point. I have to wonder how did that get past the Preliminary screening."

".....Oh..."

The announcer wasn't expecting an avalanche of praises, obviously. Yu Sae-Jung's particularly fussy personality was famous throughout the Dawn Knights Order already. But he didn't expect her to be so ruthless with her put-downs at all...

"Hmm. Alright, please, continue with your evaluations."

However, wouldn't such a character go down well with the audiences as well? An ice-cold highschool girl with a cute face spitting out decidedly harsh judgements. The announcer's face regained its happy bearings and he relaxedly smiled.

"And this axe over here, looks like it might break if I slam it down just once. Oh, it really did break. It's made out of steel but, I think there was a problem with the base material. If not, then..... well, the skill of the smith must've been terrible."

"Ha, haha..."

After that, she continued to pour out more scorn. Yu Sae-Jung never gave out points higher than a 4. The passing criteria for the 1st Round was, at minimum, "better than Lowest Quality" but maybe she wasn't aware of this little fact, as she continued to slap terrible points to all the equipment she saw.

And so, her evaluations for the 17 weapons ended in a blink of an eye. When she arrived at the 18th...

Yu Sae-Jung's feet that were constantly moving forward, finally stopped still. At this strange behaviour, the camera hurriedly closed in and alternated between her face and the weapon that made her stop.

"Is this one different from the others?"

"...Yes. Quite different. Is it okay if I touch it?"

"Of course."

Yu Sae-Jung picked up the weapon, her eyes sparkling brightly. It was an expertly crafted dagger, the reflections off its sharp blade imparting a chilly sensation down her spine.

"...And your evaluations are?"

The announcer asked, full of expectations. Even he, who was not a blacksmith, could see that this dagger was an excellent item as well.

"It's excellent. It's been crafted wonderfully and the blade is really sharp. The carvings on the blade itself are also quite intricate too... and the feeling of the grip is stable and light as well. Most importantly though, it's surprisingly easy to infuse it with Mana. On the open market, this dagger would be good enough to earn the ranking of the Low, even the upper Low Quality quite easily. What a pity that it's a dagger, but still, a very good product. It's the best among what's on display here."

Yu Sae-Jung spoke to the announcer after examining the dagger this and that for a while.

"Is it possible for me to learn the name of the blacksmith who made this?"

"I heard that it's been engraved at the bottom of the hilt."

Yu Sae-Jung upturned the dagger and checked the bottom of the hilt. There were exactly three English alphabets engraved there.

"...ORK? Is this supposed to be 'Orc'?"

"The blacksmith has asked to be called The Orc, apparently."

"....But isn't the spelling suppose to be O, R, and C?"

"Haha.. well, even I'm not... oh, please assign the points first."

Yu Sae-Jung gave it 8 points.

"Oh, did you deduct the last 2 points because it's a dagger?"

"Yes, unfortunately."

"Haha, but wouldn't the blacksmith be slightly unhappy if you deduct points like that?"

The announcer was making a small joke. But Yu Sae-Jung suddenly became dead serious and contemplated for a bit, before nodding in agreement and changed her evaluation.

"10 points. It's 10 points."

""

The announcer's lips automatically twitched at the sight of Yu Sae-Jung's rather adorable actions, but since she was quite serious about this whole thing, he worked very hard to swallow his smiles down.

"That 8 points, it was my mistake so please edit it out."

*

"Hahaha..."

Unfortunately for her, Yu Sae-Jung's gaffe wasn't edited out, and Kim Sae-Jin was busy bursting into laughter.

'I thought she was picky and rude, but I guess she also has an adorable side, too.'

He felt that she was even more cute now after she had heaped praises on his dagger when she thoroughly rubbished the others so much.

– Now then, next up – we'll chat with Mister Kim Hyuk-Joon, a Mid Tier Knight from the Gaebyuk Knights Order who's been igniting the world of celebrity gossip.

Before he knew it, the coverage of the tournament had ended; Sae-Jin checked the current time, and stood up to leave.

It was 1 PM. Time to go to the city.

< 07. The Orc's Forge (4) > Fin.

Chapter 25: Lycan the Mercenary (1)

The temporary resident of a cave in the Monster field, Kim Sae-Jin was about to utilise the regular exit route for an afternoon out in the city. What he meant by the regular route was that, instead of him changing to the Ebony Wolf Form and jumping over the wire fences and traversing the wilderness that way, he'd assume the appearance of a human and walk out of the entrance/exit proper.

When utilising this regular route, he had to go through the socalled Rest Stop, a large structure built as a shelter. Inside this building which was the size of the Seoul Train Station's waiting area, he saw Hunters, or maybe Knights, going through a final mission briefing before embarking on another hunt. (TL: this is weird – the author referred to this place as Reception Area in chapter 15. Hmm....)

"Uh?"

In this place, Sae-Jin found a familiar face he saw on TV just now.

It was Yu Sae-Jung. With her colleagues around, she was intently listening to the words of a man who looked to be the captain of the hunting team.

He tried to figure out if she was nodding her head like that because the hunt she was about to participate in was important, when an army of camera-wielding crewmen descended down on the group out of nowhere.

"Be rest assured as we got our own Knights providing protection so, please, just focus on hunting as you'd do normally. We only want to capture your natural actions. Aren't we doing this, because the public's opinion on the Knights Orders aren't so good right now thanks to the recent Monster Outbreak? Let's turn all of that around with this reality TV show! Although we're filming only the pilot episode, but still, please remember that this isn't a

documentary but a reality TV!! Please, please remember this. Oh, and.... Knight Yu Sae-Jung?"

"Yes?"

"Well, it'll be like, since Miss Sae-Jung is the face of the show, so, we'll have to focus more on you from now on. A cold expression is okay, no, it's more than okay, but please smile every now and then. That's for the best, you see. If you're cold and distant all—day long, the viewers might end up not liking you. So, people would think more favourably of you when an unexpected, bright smile breaks out of all that coldness. Like... she's only cold outwardly, but inside, she's kind hearted... like that."

"Oh..."

Yu Sae-Jung had an expression of slight unwillingness, but she still ended up nodding her head, once.

'It's just them filming stuff for a show.'

The guy Sae-Jin thought was the captain of the team, actually turned out to be the producer of the show. Sae-Jin stood there watching for five minutes before moving towards the exit. Actually, he tried to move, but....

"H, hey, please wait a moment!!"

*

Yu Sae-Jung found the current situation not to her liking. But she couldn't do anything about it. It was decided to give access to her life to these media people already. She also knew that, in order to become a Highest Tier Knight in the future, the goodwill of the public would be important, to a certain degree.

To follow in the footsteps of Kim Yu-Rin, her childhood idol, she was willing to endure just about everything.

"Please remember, it's not a documentary, but a reality TV show!! And... Knight Yu Sae-Jung?"

She disliked this producer who wanted to package the Monster hunts into a reality entertainment TV show, but her father did recommend him, saying the man had the right abilities.

She did her utmost hardest to repress the urge to just get up and run away, and reluctantly made her replies. Even after that, though, this guy continued to yap on and on. So, she answered him insincerely while turning her gaze elsewhere. This was the only way for her to endure this torture.

And that's how, like fate or even maybe a lie, she found him.

"H, hey, please wait a moment!!"

"Eh? K, keuk!!"

At her sudden outburst, the producer got confused but Yu Sae-Jung couldn't care any less even if she tried. She shoved aside the producer blocking her way, then rushed out in front of the man she had been searching for.

"....Hmm?"

"....Is it... really him?"

Now that she was standing before him, Yu Sae-Jung had to take a moment and wonder. The face was the same, but... was his size this big before?

"Excuse me, you're Mister Kim Sae-Jin, yes? From that time."

However, the face was definitely the same as the one engraved in her memories, so she worked hard to appear confident. Even if he seemed a bit taller, it was definitely the same guy.

....,

"I know it's you. Why aren't you answering me?"

When Sae-Jin failed to reply, she narrowed her brows and stared up into his eyes. She was even more convinced now, even though the question of his height entered her mind again. This man's face was completely embedded in her brain and she would never be able to forget it no matter what. Hell, she even saw it in her dreams several times already.

"...Good to see you again."

Kim Sae-Jin thought about playing dumb here. But in the end, he offered his hand for a shake with a smile. After all, she was Yu Sae-Jung – the daughter of the Dawn Knights Order's Master, as well as the granddaughter of the Dawn Corporation's Chairman. He thought that letting go of this chance to build a personal bridge would be such a waste.

"Ah, as I thought... Thank you... for that time."

And as the two of them shared only this much of conversation, suddenly a camera was shoved in his face.

"Miss Sae-Jung, who is this gentleman?"

The producer asked, his face brightly smiling in happiness. Well, it was an entrance of a new character. Not just any, but a man, that made the frosty "gold spoon" female Knight go out of her way to offer a warm greeting. The producer planned to shoot some opening sequences in this Rest Stop but hell, wasn't this an unexpectedly huge scoop?

"What do you think you're doing? Get rid of the cameras!!"

Fearing Sae-Jin would escape trying to avoid the cordon of cameras, she grabbed the collars of the producer and shouted in anger. At her unexpectedly sharp reaction, the producer panicked a little. If he got on Yu Sae-Jung's bad books, then not only in the entertainment industry, he wouldn't be able to find work anywhere on this planet...

However – his desire regained its vigour the moment he saw the face of the unknown person, Kim Sae-Jin. This unknown man didn't seem to be too bothered by the presence of the cameras. If anything, a gleam of curiosity could be spied from his eyes.

"Excuse me, mister? By any chance, is it possible for us to film

you for a very brief moment? The TBK Production is making a reality TV show about Knights..."

"Hey, you!!"

Yu Sae-Jung pushed the producer back while stealing glances at Kim Sae-Jin. Contrary to her worries, though – he didn't seem to show any discomfort towards the sudden intrusion of the cameras.

"....It, it won't take too much of your time. It's like, it's the opening, and an unexpected but fateful encounter~~ Stuff like that is good for the ratings, you see. Very good, in fact."

Sae-Jin slowly scratched his chin and agonised a little about this. For him to appear on TV... Wasn't this one of his childhood wishes? He felt envious, watching those shows featuring cool celebrities and Knights, wanting to be just like them. But that was a dream unattainable for a child who was struck down by the sudden twist of fate to become an orphan.

"What type of show is this?"

When Sae-Jin nodded his head slightly, a thick smile drew up on the producer's face. But Yu Sae-Jung frowned instead and had to ask him first.

"...Eh? Are you okay with this?"

"Oh, well, actually.... it's been a while since our last run-in, so I thought..."

"It's Yu Sae-Jung."

"Ahaha. If so, then, we'll start filming for a bit now. It's simple, actually. Just talk to each other, as if we aren't even here in the first place. Well then, we'll be just over there, so don't mind us~"

Cameras retreated slowly and maintained a comfortable distance. Of course, it was still noticeable but Sae-Jin did his best to sound natural as he spoke.

"Shall we go somewhere to sit down and talk?"

"Oh? Ah.... alright. Good idea."

The two of them walked towards the coffee shop located inside the Rest Stop.

*

"Heh... Isn't this a huge scoop? Who knew, that picky and rude gold spooner would be this talkative?"

The producer and his crew members, as well as other Knights, couldn't stop being surprised and astonished by the sight of Yu Sae-Jung beyond the glass of the coffee shop.

She always maintained a cold, expressionless face and whenever she spoke, it was as if she was throwing rocks out of her mouth with her stiff, officious attitude. (TL: the author made a joke based on wordplay here, but please forgive my shortcomings, I couldn't TL it properly. Oops.)

But right now, sitting there talking to this unknown man, Yu Sae-Jung seemed different. It wasn't on the level of calling her face blooming brightly but at least, she was not icy cold any more. And to top it all off, those cute little mouth of hers busily bobbled up and down to string lengthy sentences instead of her usual short, curt answers.

Those who knew her, ended up wondering if that girl sitting over there was indeed the real Yu Sae-Jung or not....

"Hey! She smiled!! Did you get that?"

"Yep. And it was a close-up shot."

"Ou. Nicely done. Nice. What about audio?"

The producer asked the sound recordist. The man in charge of recording sound raised his thumb up, a deep smile etched on his face.

"The contents of their conversation are pretty nice as well. Seems like that guy is a Hunter, and saved Yu Sae-Jung once before from danger."

"Oooh. And he's a Hunter? But a Hunter saved a Knight? How?"

"They haven't talked about it yet. That part's been glossed over, and they are talking about more mundane stuff now. Oh, wait!!"

Suddenly, the sound recordist opened his eyes wide and let out a loud gasp.

"What?"

"She just asked him to join the Dawn Knights Order. She's trying to scout him."

*

"Would you like to join our Dawn Knights Order? We always welcome a talented person like you, Mister Sae-Jin."

Kim Sae-Jin could only grin softly at her serious offer. Wasn't the way she speak too grown up – even though she was still just a minor, a high school student?

"I'm grateful for your consideration, but... I've made up my mind to stay as a solo Hunter."

He replied "half" politely to her. In the beginning, he spoke in a more familiar tone since there was a bit of age gap between them, but she showed signs of not liking that, so he decided to converse with her in the established conventions of honorific speech. (TL: the Korean language has a honorific speech pattern which is nighon impossible to replicate in full in English. This time, the author used "합쇼체". I TLed it as "speaking half politely" instead.)

"As a solo Hunter?"

Yu Sae-Jung's eyes went round as she tilted her head.

A solo Hunter was a person not affiliated with any organizations or Knights Orders. This was pretty rare, even more than the so-called "Free" Knights. That's because most Hunters couldn't hunt Monsters on their own. (TL: the author used the word "무적" to

describe the Knights in this paragraph. It means, in this case at least, someone who has not been "recorded" anywhere – not with any government, not with any body of education nor business entities, not even families. So, uh, I'm not aware of simpler English term that can accurately imply such a state other than "free", so I used that word.)

"...Without a doubt, if it's you, Mister Sae-Jin, I guess it's possible. That amazing strength you displayed back then, it was a Trait, yes?"

Sae-Jin's body trembled for a moment. But he maintained a poker face and sipped the coffee.

"...Yes. You're correct."

"If it's not too much trouble, can I ask you what kind of Trait it is?"

At her question, Sae-Jin pondered slightly, before giving her an ambiguous answer.

"It's a Trait related to physical constitutions."

"A-ha."

Thankfully, Yu Sae-Jung accepted his story without a problem. In a way, his attitude made sense, as most Knights with Traits tried to keep the detailed information of their abilities under the wraps.

"Oh and, you seemed to have grown taller than before? Must be the result of the Trait's growth."

"Eh? Ah... Yes. That's exactly it."

This was a more believable excuse than trying to explain via usage of some magical "potion", which he should have thought of before. Sae-Jin hurriedly nodded his head.

"A Trait, you say...."

Yu Sae-Jung fell into a deep thought while sharply staring at his eyes, almost enough to bore holes in his body. This was one of her

habits. When she stared long enough until the other party felt uncomfortable, they would turn away and avoid the eye contact first.

However, Sae-Jin didn't do that. Actually, he found it rather wondrous the way her jewel-like eyes seemed to wiggle around in a matching rhythm with her flowing thoughts.

"I wonder... although you are a solo Hunter, isn't it possible to go out on a cooperative hunt with our Knights Order? Your skills have already been confirmed, after all."

At her words that came out after a short moment of pondering, Sae-Jin grinned slightly while nodding his head.

"Yes, it's possible."

"That's great. Then give me your contact numbers. Unfortunately, it looks like I need to go soon.... I'll give you a call at a later date."

"Please, try to contact me in the mornings. I don't have much free time otherwise."

Yu Sae-Jung handed over her phone. Suiting her personality to a T, the phone was jet-black and simply designed, the feeling of its metal frame icy. Sae-Jin saved his home number on the phone and parted ways with her.

*

Whenever he walked around in the city, Sae-Jin was in the Ebony Wolf Form's Human Mode.

And as he walked around enjoying the attention from the passers-by, he discovered a flyer plastered on one of the street lamps.

No, it was more like the flyer discovered him instead.

'That smell...'

The thick scent of blood leaking out from that flyer had his

eyesight totally under its grips.

「Recruiting mercenaries. For Vampire extermination. Your ranks not important. Remuneration favourable.」

Mercenaries – one of the more famous jobs among those that were born from the entrance of the Monsters to this world. However, the purpose of a Mercenary was different from that of a Hunter or a Knight.

Besides the fact that they get hired with money, they had to kill people every now and then. Of course, those killed were the targets for elimination designated by the law, such as Vampires, Nagas, "Corrupted" humans, etc, etc.... In other words, the types that harmed the society as a whole. (TL: the author used "다인" in this paragraph. No context was given, and I'm assuming he means humans corrupted by Mana/magic, so I went with "Corrupted")

But in modern times, facing fierce opposition from many Human Rights groups as well as the change in the Constitution, the so-called "murder-as-jobs" professions began to slowly disappear. And before anyone knew it, Mercenaries, who had lost the meaning to their professional existence, faded away into obscurity, as well.

However – the Mercenaries didn't go extinct. Even though something as important as Mercenary ranking system wasn't sorted out until now and remained chaotic, somehow, thirteen "Mercenary's Taverns" still managed to continue existing throughout the country.

Mercenaries that have remained till the end were the bunch of hard men still possessing their original inborn nature: a tenacious, unyielding spirit and unshakeable faith. These guys all lost important people to these "enemies of mankind" so they would never give up until they get their revenge of ripping out bits and pieces of those damnable bastards.

As long as there were those who'd rather choose death over that of losing their meaning of existence drew breath, Mercenaries would never completely disappear from this world.

Kim Sae-Jin who lost his mother to Vampires, knew these men more than anyone else.

That was why, the beast Kim Sae-Jin just could not leave behind this flyer looking to find Mercenaries to kill Vampires.

He roughly ripped the flyer off the street pole and shoved it in his pocket.

< 08. Lycan the Mercenary (1) > Fin.

Chapter 26: Lycan the Mercenary (2)

In a Mercenaries' Tavern located on the outskirts of Gangwon Province.

Once upon a time, this establishment was packed to the brim with the voices of drunken Mercenaries, smell of strong liquor, sweat, and sounds of fisticuffs. Back then, 24 hours in a day weren't enough for the working Mercenaries; and when they were sitting here doing nothing, the Master of the Tavern reminded them of their shortcomings, all in a good camaraderie. (TL: this last line also confused me a great deal. Wasn't sure whether the author was saying the Master was telling the Mercs off, or it's the other way around.)

But now... all of that was a distant memory.

No one sought out the singularly 'frozen in time' Mercenaries' Tavern. A shabby exterior and the worn, broken down furniture, bottles of strong alcohol going through another stage of fermentation thanks to no one buying them – and an empty wooden board made of cork, bereft of any and all assignments.

Like the dying Mercenaries, a Tavern also forgotten and buried in time.

However, regardless how forgotten this place was, there still was one man resolutely looking after it.

He was Kim Yu-Sohn, a middle aged Mercenary.

Just like everyday, he polished the cutlery of the Tavern, cleaned the furniture, and brushed up the empty cork notice board, believing that, one day, this board would be choke-full of assignments.

SFX for an ill-fitting door sliding open

The wooden door's metal hinges made a sorrowful wail as it opened. The half opened door then made more weak noises before

breaking up completely. The man who was trying to open it carefully lowered the broken door down and entered inside the Tavern.

"....Dad."

"You've come. Take a seat."

Kim Yu-Sohn stopped cleaning the furniture and went behind the bar to receive his son.

"It's been really a long time since your last visit here."

""

The son couldn't say anything. Even though he had something he wanted to say prepared beforehand, the moment he saw his father's face... nothing came out of his mouth. As a son, he knew better than anyone what this Tavern meant to his father.

That's why, the son began talking about his current situation, trying to beat around the bush.

"Dad, I've managed to rank up to a Mid Tier Knight in the Goryeo Knights Order recently. My annual salary has doubled as well. Because of that, I've decided to look for a house here in Gangwon. Now that I've got some breathing space, I thought it was a bit of waste commuting from Seoul all the time." (TL: Hah!! Got you. I bet you thought this was our MC. Haha. You naughty author, you...)

"Is that right? Well done, son. Your mother on the other side will be proud of you."

The father, Kim Yu-Sohn, smiled warmly. The son that was looking at his father with sad eyes, bit his lips and lowered his head.

That was an event of the distant past, long enough ago to cause the memories to become indistinct now.

His mother. His father's wife. The most beautiful woman for

both of these people, lost her life in a manner that was truly depraved and utterly filthy, even to her final moments. The day Kim Yu-Sohn became a Mercenary and not a Knight was this very day. The son's dream also had changed on that day, too.

The son was always proud of his father's dependable back, even if he became a Mercenary and not a Knight. Didn't matter he came back late at night, leaving behind a young child alone; not even when he failed to return home altogether – the boy was still proud of his father.

"....Dad. From now on, let's stay together. Mercenaries... they are not coming to this place anymore."

The son was finally able to force out the words he wanted to say in a trembling voice.

He knew better than anyone, of all the hard work his father had put in. That was why he raged so much when those f*cking mass media people tried to turn everything his father had done into crime.

But now, the times had changed. The war against those bastards... it was now a story from the past too long ago.

"...That's not it."

Unfortunately, his father shook his head. At his adamant attitude, the son hurriedly continued with his words.

"I also saw the news about the Vampires. But right now..."

"No, no. That's not it, my son."

The father, Kim Yu-Sohn gently stroked the son's head like way back when his height was much shorter.

"I had a dream. You know very well what it means for me to have a dream, yes?"

"....Yes?"

The son dazedly nodded his head. His father possessed what

those great Knights call a special power, a Trait. A strange power, that was distinctly different from Mana and magic.

"I saw the Vampires. I don't know what their end goal is, but they have somehow become stronger than in the past, and are getting ready to unfurl their wings."

"...Even still, that is the job of Knights Orders now. Mercenaries are..."

"No. Knights Orders fear the public sentiment. And there are a lot more Vampires out there than you think, existing in many different places."

The son was about to raise his counter argument when Kim Yu-Sohn raised his index finger and placed it on his lips. Shh. He gestured his son to remain silent. Right at that time...

SFX for an old fashioned phone ringing

The unfamiliar sound of a ring leaked out from the old phone that hadn't had a reason to cry in the past several years. The father carefully picked the receiver up. Defeated by his own curiosity, the son jumped over the counter and stood very closely next to his father as well.

"This is the Mercenaries' Tavern."

- "...Hello."

A low, heavy voice came out from the phone.

- "I'm giving you a call after seeing the flyer."
- "Yes. It's a difficult assignment. That is why..."
- "Just tell me of their whereabouts. I'll take it from there."
- "But then, how will I be able to tell you're successful or not...?"
- "I'll discard the bodies where they'll be discovered more easily. The media will then do its job."

Kim Yu-Sohn smiled thickly as the conversation flowed exactly as

in his dream. Next up, he should deny being a Mercenary.

- "Alright."
- "However, there's a problem. I'm not..."

"Just provide me with your Mercenary Name and a passcode to identify you. That's all I need. I'll take care of registering you as a Mercenary."

- "…"

As if the man on the other side had panicked a little, the conversation stopped for a short moment. But not too long after, his "name" and the "password" came out accompanied by that deep voice.

"I understand. One week from today, please go to where you found that flyer. I'll leave behind the new information there."

- "Eh? Hmm... Got it."

The guy seemed more surprised at Kim Yu-Sohn's words, but he hung up without inquiring further.

"...Who was he?"

The son asked, clearly puzzled.

"I don't know either."

As he lightly replied, for the first time in a long while, the father had to fish out a Mercenary Application form from a drawer.

Back when it all started, in order to apply as a Mercenary, a person was required to provide a thorough proof of his or her background, such as a name, age, and the current physical condition.

But now, the story was different. Since the industry was dying, the details of an application were left to the discretion of the Tavern's boss. Grinning widely, Kim Yu-Sohn wielded his pen like a sword, and at the totally unbelievable things he wrote down, the

son's mouth flapped wide open as well.

"Wa, wait a second, dad. An A rank?! Isn't that the highest rank available? You only had one phone conversation..."

"Wasn't I an A rank before as well? And besides, no one cares about Mercenaries' rankings anymore. It's just a set of irrelevant alphabets now."

"Okay, fine, let's say we can make a concession on the ranking, but what is up with that name?! By using that kind of a Mercenary name, isn't it the same as telling the world, Come and just kill me?!"

At the son's worries, the father simply chuckled slightly. Actually, Kim Yu-Sohn found the name to his liking.

A mythical creature that ripped Vampires to shreds – more than that, a lonely but enraged beast that saw the rest of the world as its enemy.

"What's wrong with the Lycan? It sounds cool and all."

"Dad!!"

*

For the first time in his life, Kim Sae-Jin bought a miracle of the modern world, the mobile phone. And what a wondrous contraption it was. He could activate it by touching the liquid crystal display, and if he projected the screen in the air, then the images became a lot bigger. At first, he got surprised by the projected images from the screen, but he was more or less used to it now.

"...Wow."

And now, Sae-Jin was surfing the web using his phone inside a cafe near the Gangwon Province.

He paid special attention to "Neighbour" News and EntertainmentTV – and almost half of all the stories there were

related to Yu Sae-Jung. It seemed like the recently broadcasted episode of '1st Round of the Blacksmithing Open Invitational Tournament' had given rise to an ample amount of gossip material.

While sipping his coffee, Sae-Jin slowly read the articles regarding her and all the comments littering the comment section below.

LI actually liked her from the beginning. Honestly, don't like it if she was trying to curry favours and say nice this and nice that.

LWut; Didn't Yu Sae-Jung try to do that at the end with that one blacksmith? Are your eyes decorations? You bloomin' dinkleberry. (TL: no, the author didn't actually write this. He had the common sense to censor himself... I had to figure out what insult he was writing here, so I improvised a bit.)

That blacksmith was worth it, that's why, you numbskull. You can see at one glance that weapon was something else. Didn't you see the close up shot? Just shut the f*ck up if you know jacksh*t.

LDon't f*cking make me laugh. It's still a Low Quality c**p no matter how nice it is. Trying to swing your d*ck around with your trashy Lowest Tier~Low Tier Hunter knowledge? Do you even know anything about weapons in the first place?

LYep. ^^ This dagger received the official rating of Low Quality today ^^ I'll go and take a look myself ^^ Don't believe me, then come yourself, you loser b**t monkey b*****d. Will send you a PM so you better reply.

(TL: Oooooh, boy. The above exchange was written entirely in Korean slang terms. Please just kill me already.... BTW, that ^^ thing means LOL.)

"...What the hell?"

Reading this banquet of weird swear words, Sae-Jin's brows narrowed slightly. Since he didn't want to read this junk no more, he scrolled down quickly until he found another interesting article. This one was also related to the Blacksmithing tournament, but instead of focusing on people, it was about the submitted items.

Through the eyes of an expert, evaluating the selected items from the 1st Round of the Open Invitational Tournament.

Becoming an artisan at a young age of 36 and raising much expectations to himself, the Artisan craftsman Soh Yun-Han has given his evaluations on the top 10 entrants out of the 40 that had successfully passed the 1st Round of judging.

The Steel Longsword, submitted by the direct disciple of Master Kim Tae-Baek, Kim Soo-Han.

– It's a good weapon. Most of all, the refinement and the steelworking is quite faultless, and smith's blacksmithing skill as well as the important Mana infusion, is exemplary considering the level of the judging criteria in the 1st Round.

If there is one thing that falls short, then it'd be the fact that the apprentice Kim Soo-Han just so happens to be the disciple of the Master Kim Tae-Baek. This weapon isn't going to 100% satisfy that incredibly weighty expectations. Of course, he could have submitted the worst of his pre-fabricated items for this round as there are still 2nd and Final rounds to go; if so, then that definitely raises the future expectation on this young craftsman.

The evaluation of an artisan: B (a mid Low Quality)
...
...

The Iron Dagger, submitted by the ORK, the unknown blacksmith.

– To be honest, I was quite astonished. I became so curious, I ended up asking about the information of this blacksmith who calls himself The ORK. First of all, the full name of the blacksmith itself is different from the others – 'The Orc's Forge K'. I've no idea why he chose to use such a name, but still, what he had crafted caused a huge buzz in this 1st Round of judging.

If you judge it by the criteria of the 1st Round, then it's perfect in almost every way. The only weak link here is the quality of the material used, but the excellent level of Mana infusion more than compensates for that. Every Knight that saw it praised this dagger greatly, saying it's very easy to infuse Mana with the weapon.

Well, there is no point in delaying this. Personally, I'd say this dagger takes the top spot in the 1st Round. To think such a wonderful item would emerge so soon in the 1st Round... The future of Blacksmithing, and the future of this tournament, is going to be a lot brighter moving forward.

The evaluation of an artisan: A (upper Low Quality ~ low Mid Quality)

"...Keheum."

Sae-Jin let out a fake cough after getting somewhat self-conscious by what he had read.

Ttiring...

Suddenly, a text message flew out of the phone. A very businesslike, no nonsense text message was written there.

'It's Yu Sae-Jung. When can we meet?'

He had received Yu Sae-Jung's message she sent to his home because the mobile phone was synced with the landline there. There's that, but why was she calling him already when it'd been only two hours since they parted ways?

Sae-Jin decided not to reply yet, and stepped out of the cafe.

< 08. Lycan the Mercenary (2) > Fin.

Chapter 27: Lycan the Mercenary (3)

It was at night, with a deep darkness descending down like a fog.

A man, Kim Ji-Han, was walking on an alleyway while talking to a certain someone on the phone.

"Another one was murdered 3 days ago. Yes. A total of 2. No, I also have no idea. Even the police have no clue, so it's impossible for me, too. Yes. Both were revenge killings. It's revenge, because nothing was taken after the commission of the crime itself. Yes, well. I told you I don't know who it could be. I can't even get a feel for this guy. But still, I'm checking out all the Mercenary bastards, just in case. I'll let the result known lat..."

Kim Ji-Han suddenly stopped talking. The reason was because of a man standing by the corner of the alleyway. Since the person's back was turned away, Ji-Han couldn't see the face, but it was not too difficult to figure that it was a he judging from the tall height and the athletic build.

"...Please hold on for a second. Don't hang up."

Ji-Han held the phone in one hand and slowly approached the man. However, an ominous feeling suddenly brushed by his senses. He realised he should not get too close. The instincts of a Vampire was busy telling him so. So, he began to carefully retread his steps backwards.

"Yeah. I'm going now."

However, as if to say his worries were false, that man spoke to his own mobile phone and left the alleyway. Breathing a sigh of relief, Ji-Han raised his phone to his face.

"....It's a false alarm."

The moment he finished speaking, a giant shadow fell upon him from above. He couldn't even utter a single word. Terrifying fangs ripped out chunks of his throat, and monstrous hands tore off his arms away.

The blood of a Vampire was cold. An icy feeling akin to taking a cold shower enveloped his body. And at the same time, several alert windows popped up.

- ► The Skill Proficiency Level for the Passive Skill "Flesh of a Beast" has risen from F to D.
- ► The Skill Proficiency Level for the Passive Skill "High-Strength Wolf's Claws" has risen from F to D.
- ► The Skill Proficiency Level for the Passive Skill "Predator" has risen from F to D.
- ► The Skill Proficiency Level for the Passive Skill "The Scent of a Wolf" has risen from D to C-.
 - "Oi, oi!!!"

As he was revelling in the ecstasy of his level up, a sound leaked out from the mobile phone that had fallen on the ground.

Kim Sae-Jin lightly stepped on and crushed it.

*

On the following day. Sae-Jin headed to the coffee shop in order to meet up with Yu Sae-Jung. The meeting had to be delayed for two weeks as both of them were swarmed with stuff to do.

Yu Sae-Jung was waiting for him inside the most luxurious coffee shop in the city. She was sitting alone in a corner of the shop, manning her phone. Even though she still had that youthful feel of a high school girl, there was a sophisticated aura oozing off from her as well.

Sae-Jin carefully approached her and sat on the opposite side. Suddenly, the attention of the surroundings focused here.

"Ah, you've arrived? It's been a while."

Yu Sae-Jung spoke in a relaxed manner as she shut the

projections off.

"Were you looking at something?"

"News articles. Another murder of a Vampire happened yesterday. I hear this is the third victim already."

Sae-Jin's heart missed a beat there. But he quickly adjusted his mind and relaxedly nodded his head.

"Oh. I also saw that. By the way.... what is that next to you?"

He didn't want to deliberately walk down this conversational path and give himself more pain, so he changed the topic and asked her about the rectangular box next to her instead.

"Oh, this? I wonder, will you recognise it if you see it...?"

Sae-Jung placed the box on top of the table with a strangely excited voice. And with her lips twitching in a barely concealed smile, she opened the lid of the box.

"...Huh?!"

Kim Sae-Jin was left utterly shocked. However, the reason for that was rather different from what she was thinking of.

"Seeing your reactions, you must have seen that program I was in? This is that dagger. The Iron Dagger with excellent Mana infusion."

Sae-Jung had a boastful smile on her face. It was as if she was proudly declaring, Hey, I'm this kind of a woman.

"...This, how did you get to acquire this dagger?"

He asked in a serious manner. He was genuinely, really dying to know. This dagger was, without a doubt, his creation. But it was now in the hands of another person without his approval. Well, the organisers of the tournament did say they would take care of selling the submitted products, but still, they didn't even ask for his opinion...

"Our Knights Order is the biggest sponsor of the tournament so we can choose one item each Round before anyone else can. So, we quickly took away this dagger."

"...Oh, is that right? Then, did you get in touch with the person who made this weapon yet?"

Yu Sae-Jung shook head with a regretful expression.

"I couldn't. I really wanted to, but strangely, this person wished to be contacted through post only. And the address isn't for home but actually, just a post office in Gangwon as well.... I did send him a letter, but seeing that there's no reply yet... he probably didn't receive it."

"Ah. Oh..."

Now that he had heard her reasoning, the blame lied solely with his memories. He smiled apologetically and scratched the back of his neck.

"By the way, does Miss Sae-Jung need something like that? I thought you already possessed better weapons."

"Yes. That is true. But this dagger, there is something special about it. Normally, daggers with short blades don't have a good built in Mana infusion so it's harder to wield Mana with it, but this one is different."

She said that, and while gripping the dagger, sent in her Mana through to it. Sshhrunng. An eerily chilly noise accompanied the Mana Blade quickly rising out from the dagger's blade itself.

"How is it? It's great, right? If it's this much, it can more than work as my backup weapon. That's why I bought it."

"Ah, haha.... It's a good purchase. Such an item is hard to come by, after all."

Finding her bright, satisfied expression as if she was a kid who just received a new toy rather adorable, Sae-Jin ended up smiling

happily along her as well.

"Yes. I also think the same. The carvings on the surface of the blade is also really intricate, too... It's almost like it's a work of art, you know? Even my father was tempted by this dagger."

Yu Sae-Jung retracted her Mana and carefully stored the dagger back inside the luxurious box. He felt rather happy for some reason and stared at the box for a bit. Since his work was stored inside a luxurious container, didn't that mean his dagger was also a luxurious item?

""

However, Yu Sae-Jung misunderstood the intentions behind his gaze. She hurriedly shoved the box inside her bag. It was a rather disconcertingly hurried manoeuvre.

When Sae-Jin looked at her quizzically, her body trembled for a moment as she avoided a direct eye contact.

"....Are you worried about me asking you for it?"

"…!!"

It seemed like he hit the nail on the head. Yu Sae-Jung's face visibly stiffened, and it was dyeing in the colours of an unwilling defeat. Her expression was like, I shouldn't have boasted about it to him – and after biting her lower lip, she reluctantly opened her mouth to speak.

"...If... you want it, I can give it to you. Y, you are my benefactor, after all...Of course I must give to you... If you want it..."

She inserted her imperceptibly trembling hand inside the bag to search for the box. However... instead of the box containing the dagger, she started pulling out stuff like her make up, purse, books, a gold bullion... A gold bullion?! Something with a rather enormous implication popped out in the middle there, but actually, it was all her ploy to waste time for as long as possible.

"...It's fine. I can't use weapons like that. I can't use Mana."

"Is that true? What a shame, then."

As soon as Sae-Jin said those words – Sae-Jung spat out a big sigh of relief and started shoving all the junk on top of the table back inside her bag.

"That's that, but why are we meeting here today?"

When Sae-Jin asked her for the original reason for the meeting, her eyes opened wide after realising that she had forgotten all about it.

"Ah, that. Hunting, I suggested before that we should hunt together. I should apologise. Two days from now, I'm scheduled to go out on a hunt. I'd like Mister Sae-Jin to accompany me."

"Oh... It'll have to depend on time... How many hours are you planning to spend hunting?"

Since the amount of time he could spend as a human was limited, it would not work for him if the hunt took too long to finish.

"Around two hours. I also have other things planned afterwards, so I can't hunt together for too long as well."

"Mmm.... It's fine, then."

Kim Sae-Jin smiled and reached across for a handshake.

Two hours. There were more than enough people willing to pay a handsome amount just to meet with Yu Sae-Jung. For a person of her status, he was very much willing to invest just two hours of his time.

"I'll see you then."

As she began shaking his hand, a black car came to a halt in front of the coffee shop. That was some terrific timing, that.

"I'll be going now. Oh, do you need a lift?"

"No, thank you. I'll be fine alone."

"If that's the case, then I shall go ahead."

Sae-Jung walked upright first and then suddenly, started walking awkwardly as she left the shop. It seemed like she was not used to walking in high heels just yet.

Watching those high school girl-like actions, Sae-Jin smiled slightly before he himself vacated the coffee shop.

*

After separating from her, Sae-Jin went to the same lamp post where he had found the flyer. As before, there was another flyer there. Outwardly, it was an ad for "house for sale" but it was actually the information on his next job, judging by the thick smell of blood coming off of it.

'Gangwon Province, Hoengseong County, Starlight Apartment immediately available to buy!! Call 05-01-0239-4039.'

The location was the Starlight Apartment in Hoengseong. And the difficulty was... 05. The Vampire he took care of yesterday was 02, so in comparison, this one should be 2.5 time more difficult.

"...Hmm."

Sae-Jin agonised for a moment. He was getting stronger, somewhat, after hunting numerous Monsters and absorbing their Mana Stones, but...

As he continued to agonise, the OLED exterior billboard hanging on a building showed a breaking news.

- Now, we bring you a public announcement from the Special Investigation Division of the Police regarding the serial killings of Vampires.
- How do you do, this is Chief Yu Baek-Song from the Special Investigation Division of Police.

That was the famous Chief of Special Police that even Sae-Jin knew of. Probably, she was the most famous person in the entire

country.

Long, white hair. A pair of sharp but also elegant eyes, lips etched with a determined spirit. Outwardly appearing as a beautiful woman, she was the sole Divine Beast type Soo-in in South Korea. She was the White Tiger, Yu Baek-Song.

The bloodline that was widely acknowledged as possessing a superior strength than a regular Highest Tier ranked Knight flowed within her.

- The days of sanctioned killings ended in utter failure a long time ago, leaving nothing but bloodshed and hatred behind. We at the Special Investigation Division, in order to prevent the repeat of the past mistake, will swear to the high heavens to spare no efforts in investigating the series of murders involving Vampires. We have determined that all three murders were a hate crime committed by a single individual.

Even Sae-Jin felt momentarily pressured by someone as important as Yu Baek-Song personally announcing that on TV.

– And now, as a part of our ongoing investigation, we shall reveal the identity of the prime suspect.

Ever since he used the name Lycan, he was prepared to face suspicions from the Vampires, but still, his heart had to skip a beat here.

But that was just only for a moment.

- The prime suspect calls himself The Lycan, and he is a human Mercenary ranked A, the highest. Operating for almost 2 decades now, and his job completion rate at 100%, he is confirmed to be a true veteran among veteran Mercenaries. Operating only in the shadows, and as a consequence, little if any people know about him, this Mercenary even has earned the nickname of the Legend...

The highest ranking. Completion rate of 100%. A veteran. And a

Legend, etc, etc.... Hearing all that nonsensical description of himself, only then did Sae-Jin understand what the Tavern Boss meant by, when he proudly boasted there was no need to worry about the exposure of his identity.

The governing oversight of Mercenaries had collapsed a long time ago. So, as long as a Boss said so, it became truth. On top of that, there weren't any other Mercenaries to dispute that as a lie. The Boss already fired the first salvo by saying that very few people knew of him but even without such deception, Mercenaries were strictly independent-minded individuals anyway, so they would hold little to no interest in other Mercenaries' affairs.

- That's all we have uncovered so far. That is why, we are searching for those who have worked together with this Lycan in the past 20 years. Citizens, perhaps retired Mercenaries...

'Looks like I'll have to lay low for a while.'

The fake information on the application form had become a veil that completely covered the truth but, the existence of Yu Baek-Song still placed a great deal of pressure. The relationship between a wolf and a tiger was that of a prey and a predator so there was that, too. Of course, a wolf that grew up completely in an unnatural manner like him would eat up a tiger easily, but Yu Baek-Song wasn't just any tiger. She was a Divine Beast, a bloody White Tiger, to boot.

< 08. Lycan the Mercenary (3) > Fin.

Chapter 28: Changes in the Daily Life (1)

- According to the current estimates, a total of around 2000 Vampires are living peacefully while consuming the blood of livestock. The government is currently protecting their identities which helps them enjoy a smooth integration with the society. And the increase in the number of Vampires seeking this protection of the government seems to be a fast-growing trend as well. I believe the reason why the Special Investigation Division of the Police has designated the serial killings of Vampires as hate crime, is because the authority doesn't believe they aren't serious enough in nature.
- However, weren't all three murdered Vampires drinking the blood of humans? And on top of that, human remains were discovered in their homes. Not to mention, the last Monster Outbreak near the nameless church was the work of the Vampires as well.
- Of course, those incidents are being thoroughly investigated, as revealed by the investigators themselves. But, those incidents and this one is a separate issue. And, even if Vampires had committed such an atrocity, the punishment should not be immediate execution. We even established a special communication channel for Vampires as well, so this...

From the TVs installed inside the waiting area of the Rest Stop, the conversations that made Sae-Jin uncomfortable continuously leaked out. From his point of view, he just could not understand.

Vampires consuming the blood of livestock – what a pleasant idea.

However, the real nature of Vampires wasn't like that. Vampires had a totally different origin from the Soo-ins, who had blended in with the rest of humanity by suppressing their nature and even going as far as mating with humans, knowing that their identity might be lost in the process. After all, they weren't being referred

to as bats for no reason, were they? These bastards betrayed others as if enjoying a meal...

"Mister Kim Sae-Jin. Mister Sae-Jin!!"

Sae-Jin woke up abruptly from the thrall of TV's broadcast by the call of the approaching Yu Sae-Jung.

"What were you doing? You didn't reply even though I was calling for you."

"Oh. I'm sorry. My bad. I was thinking about something else. Let us get going, then. So, which hunting ground did you say it is?"

"The low Mid Tier hunting ground."

Sae-Jung promptly answered. Sae-Jin fell into a slight contemplation. Currently, he was acting as a perfectly normal human Kim Sae-Jin. In other words, his Stats were in the lowered state. If he was to do rough evaluation of his rank in terms of the Knight ranking system... no matter how favourable, a Low Tier at most.

"...Alright. Sounds good."

It sounded about right, a team of a low Mid Tier Knight and a Low Tier hunting together in the low Mid Tier ground.

"Oh, by the way, what is your current Hunter ranking? Back then, you were ranked a Low Tier, yes?"

"I rose up by two ranks and now I'm a Mid Tier."

Yu Sae-Jung's lips became o-shaped in an expression of admiration after hearing his words. It had been only four months. The difficulty of raising the rank by two during that short amount of time would have been unimaginably high, no matter whether one was a Knight or a Hunter.

"As I thought, your speed of growth is really fast. By the way, is that a weapon on your waist?"

"Eh? Oh, this? Yes, I also use a close-range weapon. As you

already know, it's because of my Trait. But, well... it's nothing much compared to a Knight, so it should be better to just think of me as an assistant for today. Back then, I just got lucky, is all. As I have said before, I can't use Mana. Like a musclehead, all I've got is my physical strength."

Seeing Kim Sae-Jin speak as if it was nothing much, Yu Sae-Jung lightly smiled and nodded her head, telling him not to worry.

*

There was a lot of danger lurking around in the Monster field. As the instances of sudden Monster encounters were rather common, even the Knights thought better of hunting solo in a ground with the equivalent rank. 'Hunting solo' in this case meant either a Knight moving alone or a Knight and a Hunter forming a pair to hunt together.

"I'll help you pile up good achievements today. For the next two hours, let's catch five Monsters, which should be enough."

Regardless of the dangers, Yu Sae-Jung was, outwardly at least, full of confidence. She was full of energy seemingly because she wanted to make up for the defeat of the other day, or maybe to show off the different and improved side of her.

"Alright, I'll be in your care, then."

Sae-Jin replied with a smile.

And with the end of the conversation, the hunt began in earnest.

20 minutes passed as they searched around the low Mid Tier hunting ground for a Monster, until finally, a faint smell entered Sae-Jin's nostrils.

[Northward, 300 metres, one Schemer.]

A Schemer was a skeleton-type Monster wearing a special robe. This robe featured an amazing protective colouring ability that allowed the sly Monster to blend in with the surroundings and perform sneak attacks that were difficult to avoid.

Since it carried around a "Death Scythe" constructed from Mana, those who had witnessed a Schemer for the very first time mistook it as the so-called Grim Reaper and therefore, a very powerful Monster; but in reality, as long as one was wary of its sneak attacks, it didn't amount to much.

But spotting it was terribly difficult, so a Schemer fell into the category of the troublesome Monsters to deal with in the low Mid Tier hunting ground. Especially so, for a Knight like Yu Sae-Jung here, who enjoyed going out on a solo hunting. She was mindlessly walking straight towards the Monster's direction, never in her wildest dreams imagining that there was a Schemer waiting for her there.

"Hold up for a second."

Sae-Jin grasped her shoulder.

"...?"

Yu Sae-Jung floated a big question mark above her head. Sae-Jin simply pointed towards the seemingly empty Northerly direction.

"...What is it?"

"It's a Schemer."

"...Eh?"

She narrowed her brows. A Schemer was nearly impossible for a human to spot. Only a Knight with a rank of high Mid Tier or High Tier could just barely perceive the feelings of danger...

"I've got a knack for stuff like this. I can sense nearby Monsters like a clairvoyant." (TL: the author wrote "like a ghost". Changed to "clairvoyant.")

Before Yu Sae-Jung could make a retort, Sae-Jin picked up a stone and threw it at the Schemer's position. "They" said that action was better than words, and seeing it personally would be the best proof there was.

Ppuck-

The stone drawing a parabolic line flew until colliding with the empty air. The Schemer slowly revealed itself after getting struck unexpectedly on the back of its head by a rock.

"See? It's your turn now. Charge~!"

Kim Sae-Jin refreshingly smiled.

Yu Sae-Jung was momentarily lost for words at his ability to find a Schemer, but still quickly drew her sword out and rushed forward. Already, the weapon's blade was gleaming in the layer of blue Mana.

At the sudden attack of its enemies, the Schemer raised the scythe to resist, but her sword that cut straight down ignored such a pathetic attempt at defense and cleaved the Monster and its weapon in half. Just like her personality, her swordsmanship was straightforward without any unnecessary add-ons.

The fatally wounded Schemer became a heap of dust as it fell, and on top of this mound of dust laid a brightly shining Mana Stone.

""

Even though she had oh-so-easily taken care of the Schemer, Yu Sae-Jung still carried a confused expression on her face as she looked at him.

"I've got a good perception and an eyesight."

Sae-Jin made an excuse as she continued to gaze at him, but it was not enough to completely dissolve her curiosity. A Schemer wasn't a Monster that could be located by some perception and an eyesight.... But what could she do? The person himself said so.

"Let's go somewhere else."

Kim Sae-Jin pushed the back of still-unconvinced Yu Sae-Jung

and urged her towards the next prey.

*

Their hunting proceeded without a hitch. The commonly occurring sudden encounters never happened once. As soon as Sae-Jin located Monsters, Yu Sae-Jung would rush out and cut them down. If there was a group of Monsters, then Yu Sae-Jung took the front and Sae-Jin brought up the rear. The strength of the human Kim Sae-Jin wouldn't be able to defeat a Monster from the low Mid Tier hunting ground, but it was enough to buy them some time which helped Yu Sae-Jung a lot.

Like this, the number of Monsters they were able to hunt during the two hours together was 15. This was the highest in Yu Sae-Jung's career, all thanks to Sae-Jin's ability to locate Monsters like a radar.

"My pockets are full only after two hours. I didn't expect this... Looks like we'll make a pretty good pair, don't you think so?" (TL: the "pockets" here aren't literally her trouser pockets, as you'll see below.)

Yu Sae-Jung spoke as she hefted the Expanding Pocket full of Monster remains. (TL: "확장주머니" lit. Expanding Pocket.)

"I agree. Us two, work better than expected."

Sae-Jin replied while smiling lightly. At his joking tone, she narrowed her brows and stared at him with serious eyes.

"I'm serious. Normally, a Knight would pair up with other Knights or Hunters of equivalent ranks, you know? But I don't want to pair up with another Knight as that would divide up the achievements. That's why I paired up with Hyun-Oh Oppa back then."

"Hyun-Oh... Oh, you mean that Bullet Man?" (TL: not sure whether the author made a reference here or not – but he used "총 알탄 사나이" to describe Hyun-Oh. Although it literally means "a

man riding on a bullet", I have TLed it as Bullet Man, but in actuality, it's the localised title for the 1988 Hollywood comedy The Naked Gun. If you've seen the original poster for that movie, you'll understand why. Also, no, you're not wrong, the author did make a mistake with the name here. Hyun-Oh is a High Tier baldy Knight, while this Bullet Man is a Low Tier Hunter named Yun Do-Han.)

"Yes. You also know his nickname? He's the butler in my house. No, wait a sec, please don't change the subject. So, what do you think about me?"

Yu Sae-Jung clearly addressed Sae-Jin in a manner that, if anyone ever heard only this part of the conversation, it would have splendidly raised a misunderstanding.

If any old hot-blooded man heard that, he'd accept the proposition in a heartbeat, full of joy. But seeing Sae-Jin take his time and agonise over the decision, she sighed out in frustration and continued with her words.

"Let's just do it together, since it's possible to pair up even if we're not from the same Knights Order. We'll divide our earnings 9:1. No, I can do a 10:0, even. Of course, the 10 is for you."

This was, indeed, the majesty of the gold spoon. Maybe it was because of the debt of \$4.5 million US, or maybe because his greed over wealth had increased, whatever, the talk of money greatly interested him.

"Let's aim high and grow together."

Yu Sae-Jung reached her hand out for a shake, her face solemn.

She didn't want to let go of someone like him.

Initially, she met him to repay the debt of saving her life but after spending this short amount of time together, she now understood the true value of this man.

Normally speaking, there wasn't a lot of Hunters with abilities

out there, and someone with a "detection" ability would be even more difficult to find still.

No, if it was at a level of spotting a Schemer that easily, then the situation was well past being rare now. (Even the 2nd generation Soo-ins that made up the majority of Soo-ins nowadays found it difficult to spot a Schemer, as their animal-like senses were noticeably weaker compared to the pure-blooded 1st generation.) (TL: this bracketed bit, again, isn't mine, but from the author.)

On top of this, Sae-Jin's physical prowess was nothing to scoff at, either. She estimated that his ranking would have been in the upper Mid Tier, and the only reason why he remained in the Mid Tier was probably because of the fact that the required quota of hunting experience had to be fulfilled first.

"As you may well know, I'm a rea~lly sturdy, strong and stubborn golden rope." (TL: this line proved to be a weird one to TL. Personally, I think Yu Sae-Jung meant to say, because of her background, our MC better think of riding on her coattails or something like that.)

Yu Sae-Jung was taught to give precedence to what she needed over what she wanted. And now, the person she needed was standing right in front of her eyes....

"What are you waiting for? Take my hand."

Sae-Jung waved the hand offered and urged him for a shake. Sae-Jin agonised for a bit longer, before laying out a single condition first.

"Twice a week. 2 hours a day. And please, give me all the recovered Mana Stones."

He then waited for her reply.

"Alright, that's not so hard."

With those light words, a bright smile filled with sincerity greeted Sae-Jin. He too assumed a smile and smoothly took her

hand.

"You promise? Let's do a stamp, too...."

She even tried to do a thumb-and-index finger stamp.

And at the same time, a new alert window floated up to his view.

[Condition complete: Forming a pair.]

- ► Acquired the Passive Skill 'Pleasant Voice.' [Skill Proficiency Level: F] (TL: lit. said "nice to hear voice")
- The host's voice will have a positive effect during negotiations and persuasions; and can evoke empathy in interpersonal relationships.
- This skill only becomes active when the host is in a human's appearance.

"Ah..."

Sae-Jin looked at that window, stupefied. It seemed like his belief that skills could only be earned in Monster Forms was quite wrong.

*

"Ha-ah..."

Kim Sae-Jin returned to his cave. A sigh leaked out of his mouth first. It was gloomy and soggy and hard and.... his body was itching to leave this stupid place as soon as possible.

'...The proceeds from the sales of potions – should I just ask for a half of it now, and promise to make up for it later?'

He thought about the proceeds from the potions for a bit. Whatever he wanted to do, he needed a home first and foremost... He was getting this close to making his escape from the stupid cave. But since it was already in the middle of the night, he might as well ask later.

He brought out his mobile phone, switched on the internet connection and projected it to the wall of the cave.

"....Why is it all about Yu Sae-Jung again?"

As he was surfing the net – the activity that had become an indispensable part of his daily routine – he saw that the No.1 real time search result was about Yu Sae-Jung. Not thinking too deeply about it, he clicked her name.

The very first thing that showed up, was articles related to the TV show The Qualities of a Knight.

"Ah-ha..."

Kim Sae-Jin nodded his head, realising that the stuff shot a few weeks ago had now become another trending topic. It seemed like this type of reality TV featuring a Knight going out on a hunt was a first of its kind, and as a character, Yu Sae-Jung had gone down quite well with the audience. It might have been an average sort of an idea at the least, but if the producer did his job smartly, there was certainly a possibility to do something big with the show.

The top trending stories related to her on the website were of fairly simple topics. Like, how did her hunt progress, how much hardship did she face during her hunt, and finally, what Yu Sae-Jung was like. The last one was a bit out of kilter with the others, but the rest had taken up more than half of the coverage and was incredibly popular as well.

He found all of them very interesting to read... until he got to see what the 7th real time trending search topic happened to be.

"...What the hell is this..."

At 7th, three words "Kim", "Sae" and "Jin" was written there.

He thought it was someone with the same name and as he was thinking that, the list of the real time search topics began to change. And just like that, new words showed up on the 10th.

The Hunter Kim Sae-Jin.

"…?!"

< 09. Changes in the Daily Life (1) > Fin.

Chapter 29: Changes in the Daily Life (2)

At first, he panicked. As easily demonstrated here, Sae-Jin's identity wasn't worth much to dig up. What troubled him more, though, was Hazeline. Under the context of having a friendly relationship, he had shown her his real face, after all.

Of course, he was not worried about his secrets being exposed as Dark Elves hated meeting people in the first place as well as placing a huge importance on being trustworthy, but still, he did feel somewhat uncertain as there had never been a precedence of an alchemist moonlighting as a Hunter on the side.

"....But man, this is so weird."

Whatever the case may have been, his name, face and the job description was exposed here for all to see in the top portal site of South Korea, Neighbour, and he found all these oh-so-strange. And the photo of his face taken from the side was showing his ungainly chin line as well...... (TL: to be honest, I'm not sure if I TLed the last line here correctly. The author wrote "his chin from the side seemed fatally jutting out." I took it as MC not liking how his chin is shaped or some such.)

'After becoming a Mid Tier ranked Hunter at the young age of 22, Kim Sae-Jin is acknowledged by other Hunters as one of the top prospects of the future, having already received the title of the Heavenly Gifted.'

The journalists seemed to love fabricating stories. He had no clue just who had acknowledged him as a top future prospect. But he had to concede that reading such rumours about himself was a fun thing to do. Likewise, he found the words written in the article itself, as well as the comments in the comment section, rather interesting too.

- He's got a nice enough face, got a good build, his height is just about right, so he matches up well with Yu Sae-Jung, me thinks.

[Upvoted 983] [Downvoted 482]

Lenguar Hunter and an unobtainium spoon is possible?

LOh and BTW, what's Yu Sae-Jung's real height?

LSaw it personally, it's between 159~160. But me thinks she's got a complex about her height, always insisting that it's 164.

└¬ ¬ That was really cute. "I told you, it's 164!! Not 159!!!"

Obviously, not every comment posted would be of nicer opinions but still, he found it fun just reading all the replies.

That night, Kim Sae-Jin stayed awake while reading all the articles related to himself and the accompanying comments sections.

In the following afternoon, Sae-Jin headed to the Yoseon Alchemy House to meet up with Hazeline. Since he was going to ask her for another big favour, he took along 9 bottles of potions as well.

He handed the potions over as soon as they met, and he waited until her face was glowing with ecstasy and happiness before bringing up the real reason for his visit today.

"The rest of the money.... can I repay you slowly over time? Right now I'm running short on funds..."

Hazeline showed a brief panic, but soon, nodded her head with a magnanimous smile on her face. Her reason was simple enough – the alchemist she was going to work together for a really, really long time shouldn't be left destitute, after all.

She immediately transferred \$1.7 million US out of \$4.2 million

accrued from the sales of the potions so far. She even added that he could take his time to repay her.

Sae-Jin thought that she was really one cool woman.

[The persuasion has been successful. The Skill Proficiency Level for the Passive Skill "Pleasant Voice" rises.]

And there was an unexpected bonus to boot as well. As Sae-Jin was glowing in the satisfaction, Hazeline remembered something and asked him about it.

"By the way, what was that reality TV show all about? I was really surprised to find that you are a Hunter. And also, friendly with the granddaughter of the Dawn Corporation Chairman, too."

"Oh... that? That's my side job. I was getting a cabin fever stuck in a workshop churning out potions, so was trying to de-stress when I accidentally ran into Miss Sae-Jung.... that's about it."

"Is that true? How mysterious. But well, it really doesn't matter what you do on the side anyways. And with Yu Sae-Jung... Keheum."

Fortunately, Hazeline didn't try to dig in deeper.

To her, who knew about Sae-Jin, it was understandable to a degree – since the near-crippled Yu Sae-Jung was able to quickly recover soon after taking the potion brewed by none other than the alchemist Kim Sae-Jin right here.

'Have the Dawn made contact with him already?'

While making such wild guesses, she inwardly accepted why Yu Sae-Jung and Kim Sae-Jin were so friendly with each other. It was a totally plausible scenario. No matter what other people said, the Dawn Corporation was the biggest company in the country. And if they wanted to find someone, it wouldn't be hard for them at all.

"Ah, right. Sir Alchemist, you do know that, by law, direct dealings between people are prohibited, and you must go through

an Alchemy House, yes? If you receive a sales request, please, you must inform us first."

Hazeline was sincerely asking for something that made no sense from Sae-Jin's point of view.

"Huh? Oh. Of course. I'll do just that."

*

Kim Sae-Jin bought a detached single-unit house near the Monster field of Gangwon with the money received from Hazeline. But the house cost him a whopping \$1.6 million, instantly depleting his bank account and making him feel bitter inside.

The house had two floors above ground and one basement floor. He decided to use the above ground floors as the living space, and to convert the basement into a workshop where he could do his blacksmithing and alchemy work.

With the remaining funds, he went around and bought various furniture. Besides the obvious things like a bed and a set of couches, he also got himself proper potion crafting tools and storage cabinets to store both the ingredients for potions as well as the metal ingots for blacksmithing.

Although he purchased so many things while feeling excited for the future, there was still a week left before he could move into his new home. He had to learn the hard way that the dates of buying a house and then moving in, could be quite different from one another.

After all that, the remaining money was around \$2600 US.

Currently, Sae-Jin was inside his cave.

Inside this dark, gloomy cave, he was concentrating on making the next weapon for the 2nd Round of the Blacksmiths Tournament, which would take place in a week's time as well. He initially thought that once some leeway was found, he'd not want to do this thing again, but no, he was getting really fired up for

this. The reactions of the media and the general populace were like a drug to him. He wanted to be praised by them some more. He wanted these people to see his hard work and go bonkers mad with admiration.

And his desire helped him to find the true value of the Orc's Smithing Technique – the potential of this incredible skill.

And that is the "bestowal of special characteristics."

It meant, as the words implied, to enhance an armament with special powers. At first, just like those simple minded Orcs, he only thought about one dimensional special traits like "sharper", "sturdier", but things were different now.

The flexibility, fluidity, flammability, density, melting point, boiling point, electrical and heat conductivity, viscosity, spectrum of colour for the material's absorption of light, magnetism, and etc, etc.... there were numerous chemical properties to consider. Depending on the Proficiency Level, the Orc's Smithing Technique could combine these properties and bestow them.

The blade that could bend like a snake to attack the enemy at the will of its user, the whip sword; an invisibility cloak that manipulates the refraction of light to fool the eyes, etc, etc – the possible types of armament he could create through the Smithing Technique were truly limitless.

Of course, the weapons with such added attributes that were made by human smiths could be found every now and then out in the market. But they were simply the results from nothing more than lucky accidents. As an Orc, though, Sae-Jin could bestow all these special attributes at will.

But for now, his Skill Proficiency Level was too low, so he still had a long way to go. There wasn't a single sign of the Orc Warrior evolving to the next level, and no matter how many Mana Stones he absorbed, the amount of Mana he possessed remained the same as before.

[The Smithing Technique has been completed.]

[Hardness Level: D]

[A new attribute has been added: Flame Damage Level D] (TL: the author wrote here "Level D Fire Start". Since I'm not 100% sure if that's a correct translation, or indeed what he wanted to convey, I'll go with a game-y sounding Flame Damage for now.)

[Although the degree of completion is exemplary, the current Skill Proficiency Level limit for the Orc Warrior is D, and thus the Level can not be raised any more.]

"...So this is the best I can do."

The weapon Sae-Jin crafted just now was a sabre. Beautiful patterns on the surface of the sleek, smooth and ashen-coloured blade imparted the feelings of noble elegance.

The attribute bestowed to the sabre, the Flame Damage Level D, did not mean that flames were literally lit on the blade itself. When a Knight breathed Mana into the weapon, only then the effects of ultra high temperature would show itself. In other words, the melting power comparable to a furnace would be added on top of the Mana-enhanced cutting power.

"Hee-yah..."

He was really chuffed at this weapon, completed after dozens of attempts over the last several mornings.

But his head was getting dizzy now. So, he promptly lied down on the cold, hard floor and fell into a restful slumber.

That night, he dreamt of a dream where he was receiving a lot of praise from the mass media.

*

It was a clear afternoon. And it was finally the day for him to move into the house of his dreams. Sae-Jin was busy placing the furniture with the aid of the workers from the moving company, when...

Vvroong...

The phone he placed in his back pocket silently vibrated.

Let's go hunting today at 2 PM.

It was a text message from Yu Sae-Jung.

In the three weeks following the broadcasting of that TV show, he went out on a total of five hunts as a pair with her. And everytime that happened, the attentions of the world focused on him. Hell, there was even an incident where another Hunter took a paparazzo shot of him and uploaded it to a SNS.

But Yu Sae-Jung didn't seem to mind that at all. She concentrated only on hunting and treated Sae-Jin no differently from before, regardless of whether they filmed her or not.

'No can do. In the middle of moving house today.

And somehow, Sae-Jin could speak to her without using honorifics now.

From their second hunting onwards, he felt that they have become friendly enough so he started omitting the honorifics every now and then, but at that time, Yu Sae-Jung didn't like it and became rather curt with her response. So, he replied in kind.

Initially, he just wanted to test the waters, but then, even Sae-Jin became stubborn about this matter and ended up not using the honorifics at all for the rest of the hunt's duration. He thought it was par for the course. After all, he was older than her by 4 years.

The hunt that was supposed to last for two hours was cut in half as a result. Actually, she became pretty peeved and returned home early without saying anything. However.... she called him back precisely after a week had passed by.

Well, that's how the human relationship generally worked – the one in need would make the approach first.

From then on, Yu Sae-Jung resolutely endured Sae-Jin speaking without honorifics. Nowadays, her face colour remained the same even if he spoke to her without one.

When he asked her how she felt about it, she said that initially at least, she didn't want to see him ever again but it became unbearably frustrating when teaming up with other Hunters – so she gave up and called him in the end. Sae-Jin naturally felt quite proud of his own skills after hearing her confession.

「How come?」

'Will take too long to finish up here.

「But that's no good. I don't have any other free time beside today this week.」

Let's hunt next week, then. I can't today.

During this exchange of texts, it was plain to see who was in the advantageous position.

Yu Sae-Jung didn't send any more texts as if she got peeved again. Not really caring about that, Sae-Jin pocketed the phone and went back to work. After all, she'd call him again in her own time. Indeed, this was only possible because this lady Knight had become too dependent on the abnormally talented Hunter's abilities.

"Thank you for all your hard work~!!"

And finally – 4 PM. The placement of furniture was completed with only one hour of human-time remaining.

This was his home. Even though he had to take on a debt to purchase it, Sae-Jin was still overcome with emotions and he took his time surveying the spacious house.

Each of the rooms here was as big as his one room apartment. The longer he gazed at his house, the closer he got to shedding tears of happiness.

< 09. Changes in the Daily Life (2) > Fin.

Chapter 30: Changes in the Daily Life (3)

"Ah... So the Dawn managed to take that potion, too? They aren't messing around, are they?"

The headquarters of the Raven Knights Order, inside the rest area for the waiting Knights. The words of a disappointed Knight spread around like an infectious sigh. Inadvertently eavesdropping on the side, Kim Yu-Rin's body trembled ever so slightly.

"Right. They are very aggressive nowadays. Don't forget, they also hit jackpot with this year's Blacksmiths Tournament, too. They say a lucky son of gun would fall into a lap of a beautiful woman even when tripping over backwards. Not only two unexpectedly great weapons showed up, there's the hidden master, too – that gathering of small fries all of a sudden became a meeting of the masters."

"Oh, that's right. There was the tournament, too. What was it again? The Orc's Forge? What was it like in the 2nd Round? Did you see the item?"

"I didn't see it but the Seniors did, though. And I hear it's pretty incredible. It's supposedly the same rank as the last year's winner, at around Mid Quality, even though it has been the 2nd Round only. Unfortunately, there's nothing we can do but to sit on the sidelines sucking on our thumbs. Since the Dawn has the first refusal and what not."

The male Knight massaged his temples, as if the mere thoughts of this event irritated him to no end.

"Haa.... That's why the boys from the Dawn Knights Order are strutting around like that... After seeing their irritating mugs, how the hell am I supposed to carry on like this?"

Their conversation was full of complaints about the Dawn Knights Order's aggressive rise to the top spot. On the side, Kim Yu-Rin let out a long sigh and roughly tousled up her hair into a mess.

"Oww, sh*t...."

If taking into account the end results only, what was happening now seemed like entirely her fault.

Firstly, the Goblin Alchemist. This alchemist, who had caused an uproar in the worlds of alchemy and with the Knights as well, was in a tight relationship with the Yoseon Alchemy House. It was suspected that they had secured the exclusive rights to distribute the Goblin series of potions.

And the reason why the Raven Knights Order didn't receive the necessary info regarding the "Goblin Alchemist" was... because of the blood feud-like animosity existing between her and Hazeline.

Next, the Blacksmiths Open Invitational Tournament. The reason why the Dawn poured so much money to sponsor the competition was to secure the rights to acquire the outstanding weapons from each of the judging rounds.

If it was in the past, the Raven would have rallied other Knights Orders and opposed this, saying granting such rights was utterly nonsensical rubbish but the quality of the tournament's participants were in a clear decline from before, so the Dawn was left to do whatever they pleased.

Heck, Kim Yu-Rin herself argued that investing in other projects with that budget would be a wiser move.

However, such an estimation ended up dramatically missing the mark. It was fine even when the apprentice of Master Tae-Baek entering the competition. But then, the Orc's Forge happened. Nothing was known of this unknown person – the gender, age, even the race; but for sure, his sudden appearance was completely out of everyone's expectations.

Only yesterday, Kim Yu-Rin was there at the 2nd Round of

judging and personally saw the weapon submitted by this smith – 'the Hotly Burning Flame Steel Sabre.'

She was utterly stunned by the gorgeous elegance of the sabre, and was left even more speechless at the name modifier she had never seen before in her life.

At first, she was puzzled by what this Hotly Burning Flame thing might be. But after testing it for less than five minutes, she was able to definitely understand what it meant.

And then, she was entranced by it.

As she infused Mana with the sword, the Mana Blade took on a crimson hue and that reddish blade aura boiled at high temperatures. As the Quality was only rated around the Mid rank, she couldn't infuse a lot of Mana into it but still, it was an incredible feat that the sword could add the effect of heat to the Mana Blade.

It was a very good weapon. It was so good, the Raven Knights Order just had to take it with them. It was that excellent.

Unfortunately, that was just a pie in the sky for her.

The issue was the 'rights to the first refusal'. As long as the Dawn Knights Order wasn't made up of dummies, they would definitely choose this sabre. At the thought of giving up on this wonderful weapon without a fight, only to obediently hand it over to the people of Dawn, made her lose last night's sleep.

"You idiot idiot idiot...."

"S, stop that, please!!"

Unable to hold back anymore, Kim Yu-Rin began hitting her head in regret when, Kim Soo-Gyeom suddenly popped out of nowhere and tried to stop her.

"...Mmm. How long have you been watching me?"

Now thoroughly embarrassed, Yu-Rin scratched the back of her

neck and stared at him. He had a shortish stature and a cute face, but contrary to that young appearance, he possessed a genuine talent that promoted him to a Mid Tier Knight at a tender age of 23 – one of the brighter future prospects of the Raven Knights Order.

"Just now. I was training with Senior Jong-Suk and wanted to take a short break."

"...Is that so?"

Yu-Rin let out another long sigh. Kim Soo-Gyeom gazed at her with worry before handing over a cup of warm coffee.

"Mm?"

"Please, don't mind too much about those things. It's not like as if Miss Yu-Rin knew what was going to happen, anyway..."

"....You're right. Thanks."

She lightly brushed the head of the young Knight she found adorable for worrying about her. His cheeks blushed softly at her actions.

"By the way, you think the Goblin Alchemist definitely made a deal with the Dawn?"

Yu-Rin asked while sipping the coffee. Kim Soo-Gyeom came from a prestigious family background. Currently, his father was serving as a judge. And his uncle was the vice chief of the Wizards' Association. So, when it came to intel, he should be better informed than her.

"I also don't know the details, but... it's almost a sure thing? Judging by the potions all entering the Dawn's pockets. They are openly being favoured, aren't they?"

"...Do you know what kind of terms they offered him?"

"Eh? Ah, from what I hear, the rumours say the Dawn has offered the alchemist his own private workshop and an unlimited supply of ingredients, to boot. That's how we get the nonstop flow of the potions."

The Goblin Alchemist, a genius alchemist who appeared like a meteor. His name might be a little irksome, but the capability and talent displayed were good enough to be referred to as the second coming of Rodes. On top of that, he was also quite diligent with his work – earning the title of 'the Chief of a Workshop' by producing over 50 bottles of potions in just under 5 months since his debut.

"Oh, and a private jet, too. There was a rumour of them buying him a private jet as well."

"What, a jet? Haaa.... I've got no answer for that. Not even one. I mean, do they have a surplus of money like air or something...."

She found herself sighing a lot more nowadays. The fact that the country's leading Knights Order, the Raven, couldn't have an amiable relationship with the rising star of alchemy, was a fatal chink in its armour. And to think, the blame laid solely with her....

"...Hazeline."

However, when a certain person's mug floated up in her mind, Kim Yu-Rin ended up gritting her teeth. Until the end, like a stubborn mule, she was getting in Yu-Rin's way. What an evil bi*ch.

"....Hey, Soo-Gyeom. Can you find out something for me?"

Kim Yu-Rin asked him in a powerless voice. He quickly nodded his head.

"Of course. Just give me the word."

"That Goblin Alchemist. Dig out his identity for me, will you."

"....Excuse me?"

Soo-Gyeom was taken aback and had to ask her again. Keeping the identities of alchemists were an unspoken rule that had been in practice for a very long time. Especially more so for a Knights Order, as they had a indelible symbiotic relationship with the potion making alchemists.

"Well, it really can't be helped, right?"

Kim Yu-Rin just couldn't accept this lying down without doing something. The number of times the Raven Knights Order failed to attend the auction venues for the potions was already way too high, because the Alchemy House informed them of wrong dates by a mistake. Allegedly. So, she decided that she needed to act, even if it meant clashing against Hazeline once more.

"Even then, even if you meet the alchemist, what will you do? I don't think we can offer better terms than what the Dawn has offered him."

"Well, that..."

Kim Yu-Rin massaged her temples and agonised deeply, before spitting out the only idea that managed to pop up in her mind.

"Well, let's just hope that Mister Goblin is a dude."

"Eh, eh?! Wha, what are you talking about, Miss Yu-Rin?!"

It was just a joke. But the reactions of Kim Soo-Gyeom was something else. He stood right up, his face crumpling in an unsightly manner. Both of his tightly clenched fists were quaking visibly.

"That, that, that..."

Yu-Rin snorted after finding his current actions where he couldn't even string proper words together rather ridiculous.

"...I was just cracking a joke. You think I'd do something like that? As a Highest Tier ranked Knight of the Raven Order, I feel that I should have a chat with this alchemist at least once. Sitting on our a*ses doing nothing won't solve anything, after all. Besides the matter of the potions, there are more important things to consider, such as our fame and the pride of being the best in this country."

"R, right, of course."

Only then, Kim Soo-Gyeom was able to calm down and sit back on his chair.

"Check it out for me. We can't let the people over at Dawn take everything away. Especially now, when we are conflicting more and more over the issues of the 'Fissures'."

"....Will do. But seriously... you wouldn't do that, would you?"

Kim Soo-Gyeom asked her timidly, like a rabbit. Yu-Rin chuckled lightly and replied.

"Obviously. What do you see me as?"

"...Yes. Well then, I'll do my best and see what I can find out."

*

On a certain afternoon, drowsiness brought on by a full belly slowly consumed an ebony-coloured wolf lying sprawled on a sofa, making it slowly drift in and out of sleep. But then, a mobile phone went vvrrooong and woke up the creature.

Opening its eyes, the wolf extended one of its legs. The paw that looked no different than that of an animal suddenly became a person's hand as it grasped the phone.

「An incredible weapon came in during this round of the tournament. Would you like to see it?」

It was a text message from Yu Sae-Jung.

It had been a month and a week after their first hunt together. The number of times they hunted as a pair was 8. Nowadays, she sent him text messages like this quite often. Even if there was no scheduled hunting, she'd message him at least once every two days. It was the proof that she and Sae-Jin had grown quite familiar with one another.

He stared at the message for a moment, before slowly moving his fingers.

「What? Is it a weapon from that blacksmith called The ORK or something?」

Even before he had the chance to put the phone down, the reply rushed in.

There's a special attribute added to the weapon and when you pour the Mana in, it becomes dyed in red and starts boiling. Add that together with the improved cutting power, I think it's going to show off some shocking potential. Regrettably, I couldn't swing it, though.

「Is it okay to tell me that? Isn't that a spoiler territory?」「Ahh, it's fine.」

A short reply, and then the images of the sabre in question flooded his inbox. As if she was taking pics of a delicious food, there were several shots taken from differing angles, and some of them even had filters applied as well.

「Looks good. Are you going to use this one too?」

'I'd like to, but can't. Others might see it in a bad light. If I wish to take the final winner of the tournament, I have to let this one go. I'm really excited to see what will come out in the finals. (smiles)

He felt quite proud when she started praising the weapon.

If someone like Yu Sae-Jung who was famous for being blunt without caring for other people's feelings was this enthusiastic, he could expect to see some favourable reactions this time as well.

「By the way, do you have time this week Friday?」
「I might. What, another hunt?」
「Yes.」

Sae-Jin grinned slightly. It seemed that all the messaging to and fro was to butter him for this moment, to ask him out for a hunt.

「Okay, cool. How about 2 PM?」

「Yes. It's cool. (thank you)」

「By the way, you don't have do those emoticon thingy towards the end, you know.」

I know. Oh, and it's not "towards" but "at". You are fine with the regular grammar, but why do you always get this one wrong? (TL: weeell, this line had our MC speak in a local dialect and Yu Sae-Jung is admonishing him for the grammatical faux pas. It's literally untranslatable to English. So I ended up making stuff up. Please bear with me on this one...)

"...Keheum."

「My bad. I didn't receive proper education. I'll engrave it to my heart.」

「(LOL) (it's okay)」 (TL: Daijobu, desu!!)

"....Fuuhu."

Sae-Jin scratched his head while sighing, unable to figure out whether she was making fun of him or not.

< 09. Changes in the Daily Life (3) >

(TL: in case if you're wondering, those bracketed words at the end of Yu Sae-Jung's messages are supposed to be smiley faces/emoticons. But in the raw, they are in texts.)

Chapter 31: The Quickening (1)

In the low Mid Tier hunting ground of the Monster field.

Kim Sae-Jin and Yu Sae-Jung were hunting together under a rather nice atmosphere.

It had been just over an hour, but her Expanding Pocket was nearly full with the Monster remains.

"Ah. There has been an increase in the number of Monsters rampaging around in cities lately."

As if she had abruptly remembered it just now, Yu Sae-Jung opened her mouth as they continued to search for their next prey.

"Is that right?"

"Yeah. So, Knights Orders have begun in-depth investigations into the matter but a lot of the stuff must be of a sensitive nature. They've been all labelled top secret."

"Hmm. That is strange. Oh, another Ebony Wolf is hiding over there."

He pointed at a bush and spoke. Since it was an Ebony Wolf, he sort of felt empathy towards it, but well, naught he could do for it now. The rule of the strong preying on the weak was heartless and cruel, after all.

"Alright. I'm on it."

It was a surprising thing for a human to spot an Ebony Wolf but, Yu Sae-Jung was now more or less used to it – she just replied calmly and gathered Mana into her sword. From the expensive sword in her hand, raging Mana rose up, quickly forming into a refined blade.

Her Mana, compared to when Sae-Jin first met her, every facet of it had taken a qualitative leap forward – the density of it, the richness of its colour, etc. When he asked her how she did it, Yu Sae-Jung explained that she too possessed a Trait which made it possible for her to grow so quickly. Of course, she also chose not to tell him the details of her Trait as well.

"Ha-aht!!"

With a loud shout, she kicked the ground and rushed forward. Her target was the Ebony Wolf hiding in the bushes.

SFX for a blade slicing the air

Her smooth horizontal swing sliced apart the tall grasses, and the Wolf hidden within issued a short whimper before expiring immediately. Sae-Jin lowered his head to mourn its passing without even realising it.

"Fut. What are you doing?"

After stuffing the remains of the Ebony Wolf into her Expanding Pocket, she approached him while leaking a smile.

"Oh, ah, it's nothing."

He hastily made an excuse. Yu Sae-Jung tilted her head in slight confusion, before pulling out her phone in a hurry to check the time.

"Looks like I've got to go."

"Mm? It's been only an hour, though?"

"I have to go to The Eden tomorrow for the rank advancement exam."

"Ah, is that right?"

The Eden was the name given to the tallest building in the skyscraper-dominated province of Gangwon. Often referred to as the holy land of the Knights, it was the place where the administrative work regarding all things Knight-related took place, such as the aforementioned rank advancement exam, as well as the education and training of the young, up-and-coming Knights.

"Well, since there's still a bit of time left before my chauffeur arrives, why don't we have a coffee while we wait?"

Sae-Jung smiled and made a suggestion.

He thought about this for a bit. Right now, it was 3:30 PM. It was still in the afternoon, and since he was planning to go on a solo hunt later on anyway, there didn't seem to be a reason to be mindful of the time limit here.

"Yeah. Let's."

So, he nodded his head.

"In that case, let's go right away. I hear there's a new coffee shop inside the Rest Stop called 'Dawn In Coffee'." (TL: the name of the coffee shop is written in English in raw.)

"I'm okay with whatever. Dunno much about stuff like that anyways."

"Well, in that case, you'll just have to follow me, then."

They turned around and headed back towards the Rest Stop.

*

As soon as they arrived, Yu Sae-Jung dragged Sae-Jin and entered the coffee shop. The ordering and paying were Yu Sae-Jung's job. She expertly ordered at the counter and walked back to their table.

"When is the driver coming?"

At his query, Yu Sae-Jung delayed answering and checked on her phone first.

"30 minutes. Around 30 minutes."

Her eyes didn't leave the liquid crystal display as she answered. And then, she went silent. Judging from the way how she kept on wetting her lips, she seemed to be a little bit tense.

Yu Sae-Jung was about to go on a week-long training camp from today in The Eden, the Holy Land of the Knights. Even though it

was nearly impossible for an 18 year old to become a full Mid Tier Knight, she still had to continue attending several of these tests just for her inevitable rank advancement in the future.

"Mm... You nervous?"

She immediately shook her head at his question. However, her oddly quick answer only served to reinforce the notion of her being tense instead.

"Nope. Not at all. I mean, I'm not even expecting anything. Both my achievements and skills are still very far from being on the level of a Mid Tier anyway."

"...If you say so."

However, as she implied, her initial nervousness eased with the passage of time.

It seemed that, as they drank coffee and conversed, she could sense that her mind had gradually calmed down.

"You sure do have... a nice scent."

And 20 minutes had passed. The coffee had cooled down, and the topics of conversation had dried up. As Sae-Jin wordlessly checked on his phone, suddenly Yu Sae-Jung muttered out as if it was in passing.

"Oh, thanks. But I don't use perfumes, though."

"I know. I haven't heard of a perfume like that anyway."

Yu Sae-Jung stared at him and lightly grinned.

"But there's something different about your scent. When I'm next to you, my mind inexplicably calms down. Honestly, until a short while ago, I was really nervous, you know? But when I keep on breathing in your scent..."

She stopped her words and carefully breathed in the air. Her demeanor was practised and careful, as if to impart the feeling that even the actions of sniffing the air could be an act of elegance itself.

"Really, it helps me to settle my mind. I'm sure you weren't aware of it, though? Normally, a person supposedly doesn't know of his own smell, so..."

"Oh.... yeah? Right. I didn't know."

Honestly speaking, of course he knew already. It was all because of his Passive Skill born out of his Trait. The Scent of a Wolf was said to have special effects on the... opposite s*x. It was likely that Yu Sae-Jung was subjected to this effect at the moment.

"But still, it's quite faint, so if it's not an enclosed space like this, it's not easy to smell it properly. Especially out in the forest. The rank smell of blood and the Monsters are far too strong there."

"Is that the reason why you wanted to come here?"

"....Yep. That was one of the reasons."

As she spoke up to here and smiled, the phone placed on top of the table vibrated and issued a ring.

"Ah, looks like he's arrived. I should get going now."

Yu Sae-Jung rose up from her seat, and Sae-Jin followed her.

"Mm. Do your best."

"Yeah, thank you. By the way.... later on when I need your help again, can I bother you for a quick favour?"

At her cutely-made request, Sae-Jin nodded his head while smiling.

At the same time, an alert went off.

- ▶ The Skill Level of the Scent of a Wolf has risen from C-to C.
- The strong odour of a wolf. Depending on the gender, race, individual taste and characteristics, varied positive effects will be applied.
 - This skill will also remain active during the Human Form.

"Well, I shall go ahead first. And... please don't greet me out. My father... has also come today."

Yu Sae-Jung spoke apologetically. But Sae-Jin nodded his head in agreement as if that was the most obvious thing in the world.

And right after seeing her depart with his own two eyes, he turned back towards the Monster field.

The real hunting was about to begin.

*

Kim Sae-Jin's Trait continued to grow. He diligently hunted in the Mid Tier hunting ground and with the exception of a handful of Mana Stones he'd use for potion crafting, he swallowed them all.

However, as usual, the problem laid with the evolution. He just could not evolve no matter what.

No, he hadn't had found it yet.

"...A Goblin Witchdoctor." (TL: the author used the Hanja word for witchcraft and wrote "a witchcraft Goblin." Obviously that doesn't sound right when TLed literally, so I changed it to a Witchdoctor.)

Kim Sae-Jin in the wolf beast form silently observed the distant Goblin village while lying hidden in the bush. He coincidentally discovered this sprawling village located by the mountain side. And it was fairly easy to discern the types of Goblins living in this village. He only had to take a look at those Sotdae-like wooden poles they were carrying.

(TL: a Sotdae is... uh, according to Wikipedia: a tall wooden pole or a stone pillar with a carved bird on top, built for the purpose of folk belief in Korea. It is commonly erected near the entrance of villages to ward off evil spirits as well as to represent villagers' wishes for prosperity and well-being.)

Those carrying that pole and capable of using witchcraft, the Goblin Witchdoctors.

Even though outwardly they appeared to be a bunch of weaklings, all frail and small of stature, their notoriety was high enough to pierce the heavens.

Their bad reputation wasn't simply the result of their fondness towards practising the deadly witchcraft. The thing was, one would find pretty much no loot in their villages after braving all those dangerous curses and conquering them. At least there was a chance of procuring potions when raiding a Goblin village specialising in medicine but well, there was no point in attacking a village full of Witchdoctors as that kind of action pretty much signified the old adage of "High Risk, Low Return."

However – that was applicable for those who saw the Monsters in monetary values only.

'Back then, I evolved after killing a Goblin.'

In all honesty, it was a bit hard to call that an evolution for his Goblin Form. It was more like him absorbing knowledge and going through an awakening of sorts.

SFX for swallowing saliva

Sae-Jin unconsciously swallowed his saliva. A Goblin Witchdoctor. It was an opponent that the current him would find hard to deal with. Of course, if it was a one on one situation, that wouldn't be a problem but unfortunately, life wasn't so considerate towards his feelings.

'I need to kill an Elite, or something stronger.'

He understood that killing a regular Goblin was a waste of time. Just like that time, he needed to kill an Elite Goblin, the one with lots of tattoos on its body.

Using the eyes of a Wolf, his gaze pierced further and deeper into the village. The previously-limited scope of his sight expanded gradually. The eyesight that didn't know the meaning of the physical limitation continued to expand until he finally spotted a suitable Goblin.

It was located inside the deepest parts of the village; and it was noticeable due to it performing some kind of a ritual. It also wore a headgear signifying its position as a Chieftain, its body playing host to numerous tattoos.

That was the one.

The wolf's savage lust for battle spread out from his beastly heart and made his body tremble slightly.

He briefly thought about the ways to kill that Goblin. But well, it was actually quite simple, really.

He'd dash past the mountain side, bite the Goblin Chieftain to death, and urgently hoof it outta there.

From his current position to where the Goblin was, using the absolute speed of this beast form, it'd only take 10 seconds.

However, he thought there was something slightly lacking with this plan. Goblins' speed in firing off the witchcraft magic was deceptively fast. If he wanted to avoid getting cursed to death, then he had to be faster.

He accessed the small pouch hanging on his wrist and pulled out a small bottle of potion. It was a low Mid Tier ranked potion called 'A Goblin's Courage', capable of boosting his physical stats temporarily.

The bottle was as small as a speck of dust within the huge palm of the beast, which made it difficult to pop open the lid. So, he just swallowed whole the bottle down his throat.

The effects of the potion appeared quickly. His muscles expanded and his body felt hot.

Sae-Jin crouched and took on the starting pose of a sprinter.

And finally, he activated the last piece of the doping procedure.

[The skill 'Warrior of Reversal' has been activated. All Stats rise temporarily.]

Normally, the skill Warrior of Reversal aided with the durability and strength, as well as resistance to pain; it had little to do with increasing speed. But for him, he needed that increase in durability and pain resistance right now.

The wolf's – the beast's – heart could freely control the circulation of blood. If he could momentarily increase the rate of blood flow, then he'd be able to display significant burst of overwhelming power.

"SFX for beast growling"

The blood in his body rapidly circulated like a boiling liquid. As the sensation of his body ready to blow up from the churning heat spread throughout, he felt the unexplainable feeling of the perceivable time slowing down to a crawl.

He could clearly see the blowing winds, and these winds rustling the blades of grass.

All his preparations were now complete.

Right away, he kicked the ground, hard.

The illusion of the world twisting apart occurred. At the incredible pressure created by his speed, the atmosphere was being compressed ruthlessly, and every time he took a step, the ground below violently caved in.

And when he gained enough speed, he then activated the Whirlwind Dash.

His speed broke past the speed of sound.

Moving so fast that not even leaving behind an afterimage, the beast was like a calamitous land-bound lightning strike.

In the blink of an eye that didn't even last two seconds, Sae-Jin arrived in front of the Goblin Chieftain. And before the expression on the Goblin's face had the time to change, the wolf's savage fangs shot out towards its neck.

Kwajeeck.

Sae-Jin started running again, with the Goblin trapped between his jaws. He obviously didn't want to get cursed by dawdling around there.

====

- ► [Complete: Tradition of Goblins, Inheritance of Memories.]
- The host has absorbed the blood of the Goblin Witchdoctor (leader type). Now, the host can use 'Goblin Chieftain's Witchcraft'. (The witchcraft that can be used will be dependent on the Stat, Magic Strength.)
 - ▶ 'Spiritualisation' [Skill Proficiency Level: F]
- Matter can be turned into spirit forms and stored inside the host's body.
- When a matter is stored in the host's body as a spirit, 30% of the matter's original characteristics will be granted to the host.
 - ▶ 'The Curse of Binding.' [Skill Proficiency Level: F]
 - By sacrificing his own blood, the host can restrain a target.
 - ▶ 'Magic Tattoos' [Skill Proficiency Level: F]
- The host can use liquids from potions, blood of the others or even liquified Mana to inscribe Magic Tattoos on his or other's body.
- The Magic Tattoos will show differing effects depending on the base ingredients used.

These messages popped up. Kim Sae-Jin ran and ran while carrying a thick smile on his face.

The Spiritualisation – what a great skill he earned just now. No, should it be called witchcraft, instead?

Whatever the case may have been, he was more than satisfied. To turn things into spirits and store them in his body which would in turn grant him increased stats – didn't that mean a new way to utilise his equipment from now on had appeared?

On top of that, the Magic Tattoos also had seemingly no limit as to how it could be used in the future.

"...*SFX for a beast growling*"

Sae-Jin quickly arrived at the banks of a stream with very little trace of human activity and lowered the dead Goblin down in order to search for the loot.

However.... his left arm wouldn't move.

"...?"

Confused, he took a look at his left arm.

And from his arm, a black aura was rising up like a steam. It was a curse.

'....Oh, sh*t.'

The f*cking Goblin still managed to curse him in that short amount of time.

"KWOAAAAARRR!!"

Today, he got to engrave it onto his bones why the countless Knights and Hunters did their best to avoid confronting the Goblin Witchdoctors.

< 10. The Quickening (1) > Fin.

Chapter 32: The Quickening (2)

As soon as he came back home, Sae-Jin scoured the internet to find the cure for the Goblin's curse.

There were two ways to deal with it.

One was to find a Wizard specialising in buffing magic to cast the purification spell, or to wait for the curse to naturally dissipate all on its own.

The former option took around four days to cure but it would cost him a pretty penny, while the latter required him to wait around for a minimum of three weeks.

"Hello? Miss Hazeline?"

That's why he called Hazeline first. He figured that the professions of alchemists and Wizards had to have some kind of relationship with each other.

- "Oh, it's you, Mister Sae-Jin. What's up~?"

Fortunately for him, she happily greeted him while extending the end of her sentence.

"Ah, that is... I was..."

Sae-Jin significantly shortened the event as much as possible and explained it to her. As he was out hunting in the low Mid Tier hunting ground, he encountered a wayward Goblin Witchdoctor and ended up getting cursed by it.

- "Oh my gosh. Really? And it's your arm, of all things... It's a big trouble, that thing. Oh, but I'm currently in the airport getting ready to head overseas on another assignment right now... What should we do?"

"Maybe you know some other Wizard that can help me?"

- "I do know someone. But, will that be fine?"

Hazeline carefully asked him. Most alchemists hated, like a pathological illness, letting other people into their homes.

However, Sae-Jin didn't suffer from such inflictions.

"Yes. I'll be fine."

- "Ah, if you say so... I'll send a Wizard who's my junior to your home. Don't worry about a thing and just wait for him to show up later. Ah, and I won't tell him that you're an alchemist so you should also watch what you say around him."

"Alright. Thank you so much. Well, I didn't have to worry at all, then. I should have just called you the first thing."

- "Hehe. It'll be fine. Then, please wait for him~."

The call ended with the friendly words from Hazeline. It looked like that this curse might be taken care of much easier than he thought.

Now that he didn't have to worry about the dang thing anymore, Sae-Jin put the phone down and headed to the basement. It was the time to check out the witchcraft techniques he earned after killing that boss Goblin.

The spacious basement was divided into left and right workshops.

The one on the left was the alchemy workshop packed with tools, ingredients and Mana Stones for potion crafting, while the right side featured a sofa, the storage cabinet that stored several metal ingots as well as a glass display cabinet to show off all the items he had created so far – it was a blacksmithing workshop that just happened to not resemble one.

'Let's try out Spiritualisation first.'

Turning matter into a spirit form and storing it within the body, the so-called Spiritualisation. In order to test this technique, he took out a steel ingot from the storage cabinet. While holding it, he closed his eyes and activated the spell. The solid steel became pliable like liquid, and then turned into a metal-coloured gas before entering his body.

[The spiritualised plain steel ingot has been absorbed into the host's body, increasing the overall sturdiness. Level of Saturation 5/100] (This increase is carried over to the other Forms.)]

- Durability rises by 7.

Outwardly, he didn't seem all that different, but the feeling of his body becoming sturdier was definitely there.

Once more, it proved easier to understand by actually colliding head-on rather than wrestling with all those complicated words.

'That Saturation level thing probably means that I can store things within me until 100 is reached.'

He accepted this and moved on to the next thing. This time, he checked out the weapons on display inside the glass cabinet. They were all made by him, but ended up being stashed here as he found it somewhat wasteful to submit them for the 2nd Round of judging in the Blacksmiths tournament.

He picked up a steel mace endowed with an attribute called "Material Destruction Level E". By endowing this mace with the ability to impact the cleavage plane of other materials, it could destroy other weapons one rank below it in terms of strength.

'Spiritualisation.'

The technique activated according to his thoughts, and the mace turned into a spirit and again, entered his body.

[The spiritualised steel mace with an attribute rated level E has been stored, and a special effect has been applied to the body. $^{\Gamma}$ Level of Saturation $50/100_{J}$

- Physical Strength and Durability rise by 15 each.
- The attribute rated F-, 'Material Destruction', will be applied to

the entire body.

"....Ohhh."

Kim Sae-Jin murmured lowly in admiration. Without a doubt, this was very useful to him. With this technique, it should be possible for the human Kim Sae-Jin to be equipped with above-average strength from now on.

'But, what about the Magic Tattoos...'

Next up was the turn of the Magic Tattoos. It seemed awfully useful, judging from its explanations alone.

But considering that it was pretty darn difficult to tattoo oneself, this technique seemed openly geared towards helping out others instead. That's why it looked like a good fit for the boss-type Goblins. The so-called Chief would have performed the role of awarding these tattoos to other Goblins, after all.

SFX for a doorbell chime

He was busy debating whether to try this technique out for himself or not when the doorbell went off. Looked like the Wizard Hazeline referred to had arrived. He quickly ascended the stairs.

"Who is it?"

As he spoke the customary question, from beyond the door, a reply of "I'm a Wizard" in a man's voice came back. Sae-Jin opened the door.

"Hello there. I'm Kim Yo-Han, the Wizard."

It was a Wizard wearing a blue-coloured robe. One could discern the ranks of a Wizard by the colour of the robe he or she was wearing. The blue colour denoted the rank of C. The ranking system used the English alphabet, starting from A, the highest, to F, which was the lowest.

"Nice to meet you. Please, come in."

Sae-Jin guided the Wizard to his living room.

Then, the two guys sat on the couch in a totally awkward silence.

"Should I start right away?"

"Please do. I'll be in your care."

When Sae-Jin rolled up his sleeve on the arm with the curse, the Wizard let out a groan.

"Huh. It's a lot worse than I thought. At minimum, it looks like you need to receive purification diligently for the next two weeks."

"Ah... Is that so?"

"Yes, unfortunately. I was taking it easy since I heard it's a low Mid Tier curse but.... Maybe, from next time onwards, a Wizard better skilled than me might be needed here."

And then, more silence. The male Wizard continued to stare at the curse's condition. No, from a certain point in time, he was studying Sae-Jin's arm with a great interest, instead.

10 minutes went by, then 15.

"....What are doing?"

"...Eh? Oh, ah. My apologies. This.... your blood vessels seemed a bit different.... Keheum. I'll start right away."

Only then did the Wizard place his hand on Sae-Jin's affected arm and begin chanting.

That's when the mysterious event occurred.

The Mana in the air converged towards his hand and formed the purest form of white light. This light made him feel comfortable and warm inside at the same time. Sae-Jin closed his eyes and enjoyed to the fullest this fuzzy, warm feeling.

Right at the same time, a new alert window popped up into his view.

It was a little bit, no scratch that, completely unrelated to what was happening here now.

[Condition complete: An Orc's Joy – acknowledged by the critics, mass media and the general public.]

- The equipment created by the host has gained acknowledgment from numerous people. The Monster Form 'Orc Warrior' evolves to 'Orc Jaguar'.
 - All Stats related to the Forms rise.

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"...What?"
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"Yes?"

When Sae-Jin let out a sound of puzzled exclamation, the Wizard inadvertently asked back.

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"Yes?"
```

"Eh?"

"Yes?"

"Eh?"

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After Sae-Jin killed off this sudden outburst of stupid exchange with a bout of silence, he picked up both his phone and the TV remote.

"Is it alright if I switch on the TV?"

"Ah, yes. It doesn't matter. I've finished with the purification already."

"Already?"

"Yes. This purification effect will continue for the next 8 hours and fight against the curse. Normally, the first treatment always ends in failure. But by repeatedly doing this, we are weakening the curse bit by bit."

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"Ah-ha..."
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Sae-Jin nodded his head and waited. He was thinking that the

Wizard would leave now since his work here was done.

However, the Wizard leaned back comfortably against the back of the couch and fixedly stared at the black TV screen.

""

- So, Sae-Jin turned on the TV. The channel was set to 08. The program showing the Blacksmiths Tournament was on this channel.
- The Hotly Burning Flame Sabre crafted by ORK, also known as the Orc's Forge K, has won the 2nd Round of judging by scoring an average point tally of 9.48!!

The show was already near the end.

– This sabre has a special Mana effect built-in, and ever since its appearance, it has garnered a great deal of attention from the critics and the Knights alike. And it has earned a drastically higher tally of points than the 2nd place finisher. Finally, a word from the hottest trending Knight right now. Let us hear the final comments from Miss Yu Sae-Jung.

The emcee then handed over the mic to Yu Sae-Jung.

- Thank you. Yes, it was truly a top-tier product. Not only its design, but the performance was perfect as well. There were parts that were still a bit lacking in terms of its hardness and strength, but still, this effect of Hotly Burning Flame, something I've never seen before, has proved to be the best addition of all.

Yu Sae-Jung uttered out these short words and expectantly stared at the emcee.

- Is that all?
- I believe that the next product from this blacksmith should truly be worth the wait.
- Alright~ Thank you for your words. Well then, we shall see you again in two months' time, at the grand finale of the Open

Invitational Blacksmiths Tournament!!

The program ended there. Sae-Jin picked up his phone and began browsing the internet.

He saw that the sabre he had made was a trending topic in the real time search results at various portal sites. Even the news outlets were busy reporting on it as well. Not only that, the local critics, blacksmiths, Knights, as well as international broadcasters were busy talking about his creation, the Hotly Burning Flame Sabre.

The tips of his lips rose up by themselves.

- 9:30 AM this morning, a Fissure measuring 500 metres in diameter opened up in the middle of Beijing, China. The Chinese government has revealed that they are still battling the Monsters pouring out from this Fissure, 8 hours after its eruption. This incident has once more demonstrated the insufficient abilities of the Chinese to counter the Monster threat...

"...?"

Suddenly, the sounds of news broadcast assaulted his ears. Sae-Jin lifted his head to see what's going on, only to find the Wizard sitting there as if this was his own home and busy playing with the remote.

"...Excuse me."

When Sae-Jin asked, flabbergasted, the Wizard finally put the remote down and quickly got up.

"Ah, yes. I should get going now. And probably from next time onwards, a different Wizard will come by. That curse.... well, I think it'll be tough for me to deal with at my current level."

"....Okay then. Take care."

Sae-Jin walked the Wizard out to the door, and returned back to the couch.

- Please take a look at the footage.

He was about to turn the TV off, but the footage shown there briefly stole his attention. In a word, it looked fantastical. It showed the combined efforts of countless Knights, Hunters and Wizards. The sword aura of the Knights split apart the earth, and the destructive magic spells from the Wizards slammed around like the winds of a tornado.

"....Huh?"

In the midst of the Wizards, Sae-Jin spotted someone who was quite familiar to him. A woman covered in a robe, ordering the troops around like a general in a battlefield while freely wielding the high level magic spells Thunderstrike and Galeforce Blade Winds.

"Hazeline?!"

Although he could only see the lower part of the face, he was quite sure of her identity, especially when looking at that slender nose and the chin line. Since one would need around 10 minutes to get to Beijing from Seoul using a Mana jet, even the time frame seemed to fit.

"....She's incredible."

He only thought of her as an alchemist until now.... Totally speechless, he bore witness to the absolute domineering display of her battle prowess.

< 10. The Quickening (2) > Fin.

Chapter 33: The Quickening (3)

Two days later, Kim Sae-Jin headed to the local post office in the afternoon to collect the money for the sabre he submitted to the Blacksmiths tournament.

He entertained the idea of showing up proudly but then decided to go while wearing a hood and a robe. He figured that if his identity was discovered, it would cause quite a bit of inconvenience for him. After all, the method he used to craft his weapons was definitely out of common sense and therefore not something he could show to other people.

"Yes. The confirmation.... has been completed."

As soon as Sae-Jin entered the correct identification password, the post office worker behind the counter handed over a tightly sealed box. Even during all that, the worker tried his best to take a peek at Sae-Jin's face without getting noticed. Most likely because of the word 'ORK' written on the box.

Since he found the actions of the worker bothersome, Sae-Jin hastily escaped the post office and returned home.

"A letter?"

After sitting down on the sofa and opening the sealed box, he found that there was only a single envelope stored inside.

"....Urk?"

Inside the envelope, he found a cheque with enough zeroes to make him mutter out in shock, as well as a letter written with sincerity and care. (TL: unfortunately, the pun here is lost during translation. "Urk" actually serves two distinct purposes here, one of shocked proclamation, as well as a term to denote a certain amount of money in Korea. 1 "Urk" Won = around \$88000 US.)

[To Sir Honourable Blacksmith, The Orc's Forge K.

Good day to you, sir. My name is Yu Sae-Jung, a low Mid Tier Knight from the Dawn Knights Order. Normally, it's only a correct etiquette to greet you in person but you, the Honourable Blacksmith has requested to remain anonymous. Therefore, I hereby write to you these handful of words even though it can potentially become an irritant to you.

Firstly, we at the Dawn Knights Order wishes to purchase the weapon sent in by you, the Honourable Blacksmith, the Hotly Burning Flame Sabre. Once more, we are truly grateful for your unceasing toil and unrelenting effort to create such an amazingly useful product.

With my limited scope of understanding, I can't even begin to fathom the lengths of anguish, agony and zeal you had to go through in order to craft such a weapon.

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And that's why we at the Dawn Knights Order and the Dawn Corporation dares to suggest to you a certain proposition.

If you, the Honourable Blacksmith wishes to continue with the crafting and selling of your products in the future, may we dare to ask for your opinion if it's possible for us to gift you a small present, a smithy that has taken after your name, The Orc's Forge?

Of course, we solemnly promise that all the rights to the smithy will be handed over to you, and will never interfere with its administration. Only that, we would be grateful if you, the Honourable Blacksmith thinks of us, the Dawn Knights Order every now and then, as we only wish to make the road ahead for the remarkably talented personage such as yourself as smooth and trouble-free as possible.

Please, give it your deep consideration, and give us a

correspondence to the address I've written below.

Kind regards.

– The low Mid Tier Knight from the Dawn Order, Yu Sae-Jung.]

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It was a sincerely written letter from Yu Sae-Jung. He scratched the top of his head, wondering what he should do about this complication of fate.

'It sure would be nice if I had a smithy of my own.'

"Hmm...."

He fell into a deep thought, while his gaze alternated between the letter and the cheque.

The difference between the Mid Tier and an upper Mid Tier.

There was seemingly only a difference of a single word but in truth, the gap between the two was actually enormous. The best example was the upper Mid Tier Monsters. As they possessed something called the 'special abilities', the creatures ranked upper Mid Tier, on average, were 20 times stronger than the Monsters of Mid Tier range.

And that was why, for both the Knight and the Hunters, they had to fulfil a specific and difficult criteria compared to before in order to rank up to upper Mid Tier.

"From the upper Mid Tier ranking upwards, a Hunter must compete in the Mid Tier Hunters Leaderboard, and you must belong to a Society, as well as have a recommendation from a Knights Order."

At the Monster Store, the clerk handed over a sheet of paper and spoke.

「Republic of Korea's Mid Tier Hunters Leaderboard」

1st place: Ryu Seung-Han, 3309 points.

2nd place: Kim Cho-Raeng-Yi, 3219 points

• • •

•••

• • •

332nd place: *Kim Sae-Jin, 989 points.

===

"Oh, and when you've become an upper Mid Tier Hunter, your ranking in the Leaderboard will be accessible to the public like the one for the Knights."

"...I understand."

Sae-Jin nodded his head while looking somewhat bewildered.

Actually, he was panicking slightly, too. He came here to sell off the Monster materials but this clerk suddenly began butting in without a prompt from anyone.

"...My ranking is pretty low, though?"

But, when he saw that his placing was only 332nd, his competitive spirit began to rise up inside.

"Eh? Oh... That's plenty high enough, actually. The number one ranked Mister Ryu Seung-Hahn is a veteran of thirteen years, and the 2nd place Mister Kim Cho-Raeng-Yi also has spent eight years as a Hunter. But Mister Sae-Jin has been a Hunter for only half a year, so it's re-ally a high position, honestly speaking."

"Okay, fine. But why is there a * in front of my name?"

"That's to denote a 'rookie'. It's to mark a person who hasn't been a Hunter for more than a year. Including Mister Sae-Jin, you, there are only two such persons within the ranks of the Mid Tiers."

Sae-Jin scratched his chin and agonised a little.

"What's a 'Society'? Is that like being affiliated with a Knights Order?"

"No, it's not. It'll be easier to think of it as a gathering of people, who can hunt together, and enjoy a meal together afterwards. You can form one with anyone, really, and not just with other Hunters; and there are no strict procedures to follow, either. All you need is the agreement of the participants. Would you like a registration form?"

"Hmm... What's the minimum number to form a Society?"

"Well, including the person registering, three. The maximum is 30."

Two others.... He could think of a couple of people.

Actually, he only knew two people personally, and that was the extent of his personal connections.

Hazeline and Yu Sae-Jung.

Now that he thought about it, even though the number was pretty low and thus nothing to brag about, the quality of those connections was just too d**n amazing.

"...So, in order to advance to the upper Mid Tier, you are saying that I must form a Society, is that right?"

"Yes. It's one of the prerequisites. Having a recommendation from a Knights Order will be good as well."

"Alright. I understand."

He took the Society registration form and headed home.

*

One afternoon with clear sunlight pouring down, Hazeline personally came to visit Sae-Jin in his home.

"Hello there~"

She strode into the house with an energetic smile and her eyes arching into half moon shapes.

"This is a nice house."

"Yes, well..."

"Please take a seat first. Lemme have a look at the curse."

She sat down first on the couch and patted the spot next to her vigorously while calling for Sae-Jin.

"Ah, yeah."

Sae-Jin sat down promptly next to her, and rolled up the sleeve of his left arm. The arm dyed in black, thanks to the curse, was revealed to her eyes.

"It's pretty serious. No wonder the other Wizard guy ran off after seeing this."

Hazeline spoke with a serious expression.

"But no need to worry any more, I'm here now."

Hazeline immediately began the purification spell. Right away, he mistook the blinding light as a miniature sun rising in front of him. That's how overwhelmingly bright it was, completely inundating everything with whiteness.

It was well past being warm and into being scalding hot. He felt like his entire arm was being burnt away along with the curse.

"It's done. You'll be back to normal in six hours or so."

The purification only needed three minutes. Hazeline grinned refreshingly in satisfaction at Sae-Jin who was carrying a confused expression.

"Now then, I shall be on my way. I'm way too busy~"

"Oh, wait a second, please."

Sae-Jin hastily reached out and grasped the wrist of Hazeline, who was just about to leave. Suddenly touched like this, Hazeline

snatched her hand away much faster than she realised.

"Wha, what do you think you're doing?"

She rubbed the wrist and became alert towards him. It might have seem as a over-the-top reaction, but Sae-Jin who was already well versed in rejection, hastily raised his hands and showed that he meant no harm.

"No, no, it's not that. Actually... I was wondering if you could hear a favour of mine."

"... A favour? What is it?"

When Hazeline asked back bluntly, he roughly explained to her the rules of the Hunters and raised the issue of the 'Society'. It was a favour of borrowing her name for the Society's registration.

"...Oh. Well... it's fine. By the way, is it okay if I used a different name?"

"A different name?"

"Yes. If it's a Society, then it'd be better as a Wizard rather than as an alchemist, I think."

Sae-Jin was slightly dazed by the suggestion, but then, he remembered the sight of Hazeline in that news broadcast, so he quickly nodded his head.

"Yes, yes. Of course."

*

After Hazeline left, the lone Sae-Jin called a certain someone. He checked the time with the corner of his eyes – a bit past 1 PM. The training camp was still ongoing, but he figured that she might pick up her phone since it was during the lunch break.

Before the end of the third ring, her voice came out from the receiver.

- "Hello?"

- "Uh, it's me, Sae-Jin."
- "I know. Is there something wrong?"
- "Well, there's a thing...."

He trimmed the story as much as possible in consideration for the busy Yu Sae-Jung and explained that he wanted to form a 'Society' but needed a minimum of three people, so whether it was possible for her to lend her name for the registration or not...

- "Okay, I will."
- "Ah. Thanks a bunch."
- "No, it's alright. Actually, I was also planning to enter a Society as soon as the training camp ends here. One of the listed things to do is to achieve cooperation, so it's me who's thankful right now.

"Well, that's a relief. Someone will probably call you later on, so you just have to say that you agree to form the Society with me."

And with that, he prepared to end the call. But before he could do that, Yu Sae-Jung's voice hurriedly exited the receiver.

- "W, w, wait a moment, please."
- "...What's wrong?"
- "All the stuff that's been happening in Eden, aren't you curious?"

She asked him in the tone of a voice that was pleading with him to show some interest. Sae-Jin was obviously not too interested, but he was grateful for her granting him the favour without much fuss, so replied "Yeah, I am".

- "The 1st test was about the physical fitness training. But it's not like the normal fitness training as I expected it to be. They made us do a tug of war while subjecting us under the magic spells affecting our minds... Really, my head was.... My soul escaped me..."

He honestly believed a few minutes would be sufficient. But that

few minutes steadily stretched past the 5 minute mark, then 10, and finally, 20 minutes.

Until the voice of whom Sae-Jin thought of as an instructor called out to her, Yu Sae-Jung tried to explain every minute detail of every little event that had occurred in Eden over the phone.

'She's a chatterbox, alright...' (TL: I had to change here as the author wrote "she's an explaining bug." Huh.)

- "Oh, I need to go now."
- "Okay. Work hard."
- "I will. Thanks. Talk to you later."

*

"Here it is."

It was a quiet morning. A man came in and submitted a Society registration form and left. The employee who had just arrived at work, yawned out loudly and leisurely scanned the form.

"....Mm?"

However, the written contents were a bit strange. It seemed like a bit of typo, or maybe even some error, was mixed in there...

...

The worker tilted his head a bit, before calling the number on the form. He was pretty sure that this was either a prank or a mistake.

- "Hello?"
- "...Ah, hello. By perchance, am I speaking to Miss Shena? The A ranked Wizard, Shena? Miss? You're not her, yes?"
 - "Huh? No, I am Shena. Why did you call me?"

In that moment, the worker forgot to breathe.

Why was an A level Wizard participating in a Society with a Mid Tier Hunter serving as a leader....? This made no sense. He was still convinced that he was being pranked right now....

"That is... I have called you... because a Society registration... Surely, it's not true?"

- "What's not true? I did sign the form and even stamped it as well."
- "No, that is... This... that, Miss Shena is participating in such a Society is..."
- "Well, yes, it's true. I've decided to participate. I am going to hang up now since I'm really busy here. But I am a member of the Society for real."

Ttukk...

The call ended. The worker's mouth remained wide open, as he tried to recall what he had just heard over the phone. But no matter what, he could not understand.

However, there was still one more thing left on the form for the worker to remain dumbfounded like that. Of course, even this one was also totally unbelievable.

'Yu Sae-Jung, a low Mid Tier Knight of the Dawn Knights Order.'

The precious royalty of the Dawn was a member of a Society with a measly Hunter as the leader? The worker's hands shook visibly as he keyed in the phone number.

- "Hello."
- "Ah, by any chance... are you Miss Yu Sae-Jung, affiliated with the Dawn Knights Order?"
 - "Yes, that's correct."

Again, the worker forgot to breathe. He had a case of a déjà vu.

"The Society... is that correct? The Society."

He was so shocked, he couldn't even form a proper sentence. But as expected, Yu Sae-Jung could understand what he was saying, even though the worker's words sounded half-a*sed.

- "Yes, I am participating. You're talking about the Society with Mister Kim Sae-Jin serving as the leader, yes?"
 - ".....Eh? Ah, yes. The Mid Tier Hunter.... Kim Sae-Jin. Yes."
- "Then, yes, that's correct. Please register my name on the system. And there will be a call from the Dawn Knights Order shortly as well."

With that, the phone call came to an end.

...The worker's soul also left him at the same moment.

66 25

The worker recovered slightly and recalled the conversations he held with the real big shots three minutes ago, then fell into a deep but dazed contemplation. For personal connections of a Mid Tier Hunter.... they couldn't be explained away at all.

< 10. The Quickening (3) > Fin.

Chapter 34: The Quickening (4)

A Society.

Initially, this system of Society began with the idea of forming a party to make the Monster hunts more effective. But as time passed, the goal and the scope expanded far beyond that initial premise. From the humble beginnings of 'hunting parties' where only the Knights and Hunters could join, to a versatile gathering of individuals where its members would communicate with one another in pursuit of the better tomorrow.

So, nowadays, people other than Knights and Hunters, such as Wizards, Blacksmiths, Alchemists (obviously in very low numbers), as well as regular civilians joined Societies. The current situation was that nearly half of the country's population had joined one or more Societies. Which meant that the number of Societies continued to increase and as such, there were as much as 30,000 active official Societies in South Korea alone.

And among all those active Societies in the country, none were more famous than perhaps the 'Trilogy'.

Its leader, Kim Yak-Sahn, was also the current Order Master of the Goryeo Knights Order.

Currently the only S Class ranked Society in the country, Trilogy boasted a total member count of 273, and they all came from quite varied and colourful backgrounds. (Surprisingly, even the Societies had a ranking system. The higher the rank, the higher the number of members it could have.)

Its members consisted of: Knights and Hunters ranked at least the upper Mid Tier, Wizards, several big fish from the worlds of politics and finance, famous celebrities, and even Blacksmiths and Alchemists. It was not wrong to say that the communication happening internally within Trilogy could easily control the entirety of South Korea. Recently, with the advent of couple more behemoths like Trilogy, a growing number of voices were saying that the Societies in A and B Classes should be called a Guild or a Clan instead, for the sake of differentiation. Already, one or two media outlets had tried those terms out to see how it would go with the viewers.

"Congratulations~ October 8th, in other words, today, is the day the Society 'The Monster' is born~!"

"Ah..... Well, thank you."

Sae-Jin was giving his disinterested reply inside the Monster Store; he came here after receiving the phone call of confirmation that his Society had been formally recognised and registered. Within his arms, he carried an armful of the 'Society Operational Chart' and 'leader business cards'. (TL: I TLed Society Operational Chart literally. 단체운영차트)

"Really, you are just too amazing! From the get-go, your Society has been rated as a D-class!"

"It's like we're witnessing the beginning of a legend~!"

Kim Sae-Jin found all this a*s-kissing a bit burdensome. More correctly, as a person who had no clue on the significance of a Society, he just could not fathom why these people were busy making a scene in front of him. It was rather obvious, actually; he had lived a busy, work-swarmed loner life until now, so why would he pay attention to the symbol of the multitude of people, Societies?

"...To start as a D-, is that suppose to be that amazing?"

"Eh? O, of course! Normally, most start at F Class, and if the evaluation is favourable, then E!"

The increase in a Society's rankings depended on its results. And when talking about the 'results', it didn't only mean the successful hunts of Monsters by the Knights, Hunters and/or Wizards, but also included matters such as performing volunteer work as well.

The ones in charge of measuring the number of these services rendered for the good of the populace, was some nameless government entity that no one seemed to know what it was exactly; but since there were no particular complaints from the Societies, it could mean that their evaluation process was all 100% above-board.

"Is it a good thing to have a higher rank?"

"....Eh?"

Members from the same Society usually felt close camaraderie towards each other; they also outwardly showed no hostility towards other Societies.

The reason was that, as the name implied, a Society was basically like a student club found in universities. Classes were assigned to make classifications easier, but in the end, there was no profit to be made other than personal connections that would form within a Society.

So, a Society was simply an environment for meeting people and making connections.

"Y, yes, it's a good thing! And if you can develop deep relations with other members.... it will be even better. I'm so envious!"

When looking at the Society Sae-Jin had formed from this point of view, it could be seen as a rather important one. After all, its members were an A ranked Wizard and a precious granddaughter of a multi-billionaire.

On a side note, one of the main reasons why Sae-Jin's Society started off as D-Class had a lot to do with the exploits of the A ranked Wizard, Hazeline.

"Yeah. I'm also happy about the high rank. I get this urge to raise its ranking even higher in the future, too. Well then, I'll be on my way, now."

But, for Sae-Jin who was not knowledgeable about how the

Societies operated, he simply scratched the back of his neck and turned around to leave as if it was all in a day's work.

Watching the back of such an uncaring man, the government workers present had no choice but to carry around the maddening curiosity, a collective desire, to find out just what kind of background this guy had.

*

- "But why did the name end up as 'The Monster'?!"

Yu Sae-Jung's puzzled voice came out from the receiver of the mobile phone.

"No particular reason. I just got p*ssed off. I mean, whatever name I picked, they kept on telling me, 'it's already been taken'. So I went for something nobody would go for. But even 'Monster' was taken. So, I just tacked 'The' in front of it."

- "It's true... that there are one too many Societies nowadays. Even the civilians are busy making their own civilian Societies, too. A mountain climbers Society, a football Society, etc, etc.... Ah, right. There are guys forming Societies even at my school, calling them study groups and such."

SFX for water boiling

While in the midst of the call, the water began to boil. Sae-Jin put the phone on the speaker and placed it on the table.

- "Were you in the middle of a meal?"
- "No, not yet. I am cooking at the moment."
- "Wah, all alone?"

"Yeah. I'm pretty good at cooking, you know. As good as a prochef, even."

SFX for knife chopping up stuff

The kitchen knife flashed like an arcing electricity and uniformly

sliced the vegetables. The bits of veggies cut in the blink of an eye were all shaped into a perfect geometric symmetry as if they were measured with a precise ruler.

As expected, the Goblin's Craftsmanship, now at C-, proved to be a wonderful skill once more.

- "Fut. If that's the case, then you should apply for a spot at the Hunters' Food Sense." (TL: "식견" literally Food Discovery.)

The 'Knights and Hunters' Food Sense' was a program where Knights and Hunters showed off their cooking skills in a duel-style format. Sae-Jin had heard that there were a few participating Knights who were crazy enough to rely on their constitutions to cook with Mana rather than using any cooking utensils.

"No way, since I'll never lose. Which means I'll have to keep on making the appearance like, forever."

- "That doesn't even make sense... Then, you should cook for me at a later date."

Sae-Jin stopped moving for a moment. He was about to feel good about himself. But he remembered the age difference. Although there was only a four-year gap, she was still a minor. (TL: The author wrote "궁합도 안본다는 4살차" here. It's almost impossible to describe what these words mean without going through a lengthy explanation. So I TLed without them.)

- "...Well, that's that, but can you tell me your address?"
- "Why the sudden change of topics... Which one would you like to know - the one in Gangwon Province or the one in Seoul? Why do you need it so out of the blue?"

"Gimme the one where you stay most often. I heard that the leaders of Societies are supposed to hand out gifts to the members on either a monthly or an annual basis. So, I was thinking.... that I should send you a membership gift for helping me out, even if it's not worth that much."

Yu Sae-Jung chuckled at his reply and told him the address.

- "By the way, what present are you planning to give me?"

"Uh.... well, you'll just have to find out later."

There was a lot of stuff he could give to her. Potions, weapons, and if she wanted to become stronger, then even the Magic Tattoos. If he sent her a weapon, there was a good chance that she'd go crazy over it, too.

However.... he needed more time for that. For now, it was still too early to reveal his true identity to her just yet.

"...Should I just add The Orc blacksmith as a member too?"

An idea suddenly came up to him.

Really, if he did this, then moving about as a blacksmith should become more convenient for him, and since he was the Society's leader in charge of the member's records, he could add anyone without the need for a rigorous vetting process as well.

Of course, he'd need the written agreement, but hell, it'd be rather easy to get one from himself anyways.

*

Two afternoons later.

Kim Sae-Jin decided to hunt as a human for the first time in a long while, and stepped up towards the Monster field.

The performance of his equipment was guaranteed as they were all The Orc's Forge K's products. Plus, he had turned two other pieces of equipment into spirits and had absorbed them too.

'What's this?'

However, the moment he stepped into the Rest Stop, all eyes suddenly focused on him. This place was quite big, for sure, but Sae-Jin could clearly feel all those eyes taking a peek at him.

Yu Sae-Jung isn't even with me today, though? Sae-Jin hurriedly checked out his attire. No problem there. His armours were clothing type as well, so they wouldn't necessarily attract attention either...

But before long, he was able to figure the puzzle out.

"Haha, how do you do?"

An unpleasantly greasy man approached Sae-Jin and blocked his progress.

Sae-Jin couldn't help but panic slightly as this guy, whom he had never met before, approached and started greeting him with a certain amount of arrogant swagger.

But this guy just thrust out his hand for a shake as if he was unperturbed by the reaction.

"I heard it through the grapevine, Mister Kim Sae-Jin, that you have formed a Society."

"...Ah."

It seemed like the news of him forming a Society had spread around like a plague.

Even though those government workers were making a bit of a scene back then, he didn't expect the news to spread this fast...

"Oh, right. I haven't introduced myself yet. My name is Kim In-Soo, a Mid Tier Knight from the Genesis Knights Order." (TL: Decided to use the English translation of "Gaebyeok" from now on. Got a feeling this guy will pop up again in the future chapters...)

The guy introduced himself first as Sae-Jin just stood there looking at his hand wordlessly.

Sae-Jin's brows narrowed after hearing the name Kim In-Soo. He was quite sure of hearing it from somewhere....

"Ah, the Mid Tier Knight nicknamed the 'Saviour of the Light'?"

Sae-Jin had indeed seen him from somewhere. It was that guy from that ad he saw on that outdoor electronic billboard, when he spewed out those corny, cringeworthy lines. He was the Mid Tier Knight from the Genesis Order, Kim In-Soo.

"Ehem. As expected... Yes, it is I, the Saviour of the Light. Also, I'm planning to advance up to upper Mid Tier very soon."

"Ah, yeah... How do you do. But what can I do for you?"

"That, well, I heard that Mister Sae-Jin has formed a Society. With Miss Yu Sae-Jung."

Keheum- With a fake cough, Kim In-Soo handed over a business card.

"It's a wise choice to form your own Society in these trying times. But, wouldn't you agree that having only two members is a bit, well, not enough?"

Kim In-Soo stopped speaking there. Looked like he was waiting for Sae-Jin to take the hint and continue the conversation from here onwards.

"...That's true, but I only formed one to advance to the upper Mid Tier rank, so the number of members doesn't really matter to me. Oh, and it's not two, but three members."

"Aha. Is that right?"

And another period of silence. Wondering what this nonsense was all about, Sae-Jin simply bowed his waist a little to say goodbye and tried to enter the Monster field.

"Oh, hey. Where are you going? I, I'm still standing here."

Unfortunately for him, Kim In-Soo grabbed his shoulder. Sae-Jin studied this guy with dissatisfied eyes before finally realising why he was acting like this.

"...Do you wish to join my Society?"

"Eh? Ah, it's not like I wish to, but... well, if you ask me for a

favour, then, sure, why not. You see, I already enjoy a friendly relationship with Miss Sae-Jung. We met in The Eden recently, and have shared many conversations, as well as exchanged advice...."

Blahblah- As if he had infinite amount of things to say, Kim In-Soo yapped on and on without taking a break.

But Sae-Jin became sure of one thing.

Whenever Kim In-Soo spoke of Yu Sae-Jung, his eyes would gleam and he'd put more emphasis in his voice; plus his cheeks would slightly blush. In other words, this guy had developed a very clear case of crush on her.

"Keheum. Well, what do you think? When Miss Sae-Jung was looking for a Society to join, I was going to ask her to join my 'Light Saviours' Society but then, you have scouted her already. I still can't understand why Miss Sae-Jung agreed to join yours, but... But well, it's still possible to be a member of multiple Societies, you see? The achievements would be divided but, if Mister Sae-Jin wants me, then..."

Kim In-Soo stopped short of saying he'd join the Society. While busy yapping on, he was expectantly waiting for Sae-Jin to bow down and make the offer first.

"Ah... it's true that it'd be great for the Society if a Knight such as yourself joins but.... there is a single condition for the prospective members."

"Eh? A condition?"

"Yes."

Kim In-Soo made a disbelieving face. There were lots of other Societies with conditions to join, but they were led by high Tier Knights or A ranked Wizards. So, how could a measly little Hunter...?

[&]quot;New members must completely submit to my will."

"...Eh?"

Kim Sae-Jin spoke without thinking too much in order to chase away this guy. But instead of that happening, Kim In-Soo stood there, his eyes round and dazed, before all of a sudden, his face began to take on the colours of a tomato.

It was not too hard to figure out what sort of imagery was blooming inside the head of this repulsive-faced man.

"What do you mean by 'completely submit to your will'?!?! You, you-you, what have you done to my little Sae-Jung...?!"

"It's only for the new members. Miss Sae-Jung isn't a new member, but a founder. And trust me, what you are thinking of right now, I won't ask anyone to do that."

".....Keheum."

Although the face dyed in the colours of a ripe Maple tree leaf was reverting back to being normal really fast, the arrogant demeanor of Kim In-Soo hadn't weakened one bit.

And after a lengthy, silent and hostile stare-down, Kim In-Soo spat out that no one in their right minds would agree to that kind of condition and walked away in a huff.

< 10. The Quickening (4) > Fin.

Chapter 35: The Quickening (5)

Sae-Jin was worried about hunting solo in the low Mid Tier Hunting ground, but it turned out to be a baseless concern, after all.

With his entire body taking on the characteristics of weapons via the Spiritualisation, as well as using the equipment crafted with an Orc Jaguar's Smithing Skill, the hunt went down a storm. Well, currently, Sae-Jin was a walking mass of special attributes, as evidenced below.

```
[Reflect, Level E.]
[Material Destruction, Level E]
[Haste, Level E-]
[Flame Damage, Level E]
```

[Additional Stat buffs: Physical Strength +30, Durability + 25, Agility +10]

The added Stat buffs resulting from the Spiritualisation, equipped with armours made from the ultratough corundum all over his body, and carrying an evil-looking corundum mace that let out a dangerous aura without the need for Mana's input...

All these things were making him feel real good right about now.

Most of the low Mid Tier Monsters could not overcome the hardness of corundum that had gone through the refinement process. (TL: Now, I'm sure there are mineral experts out there reading this and thinking, "Really? Corundum?" But well, I'm just TLing it as it is in the raw.)

On top of that, the mace also had another added attribute, [Growth by Absorption, Level F.]

Every time he killed a Monster with this mace, its performance would increase little by little. The more blood it drank, and the

longer the Monster flesh remained stuck on it, the more the weapon grows dangerous. Regular Monsters found in the low Mid Tier hunting ground could barely withstand a single hit from this mace.

And after plus minus an hour of concentrated hunting....

SFX for a pig squealing

The moment he killed a wild boar-like Monster called Wisrachan, an alert window floated up to his view. (TL: "위스라첸" No idea where this one's from.)

[Condition cleared: kill 100 Monsters using self-made weapons.]

- ► Acquired the active skill, 'Weapon User, Beginner'. [Current Level: F]
 - The host can now view information of weapons.
- From now on, the Proficiency for weapon usage will be unlocked. When the host achieves 100% Proficiency, the next stage will become available. (Beginner → Intermediate → Expert → Professional → Master → True Master.) (TL: this bracketed bit was very troublesome to TL, as the author decided to simply rehash exact same thing over and over again such as "숙련자" and "전문가" which I translated as "Expert" and "Professional" respectively, but actually means the same thing, just in different Hanja. It's the same for "Master" and "True Master". Hell, the word he used for Master, "달인" can also be translated as "Expert" as well. Oh, lordy…)
 - The Proficiency is not limited by the weapons used.
 - While in the Orc Form, the skill level will be increased by two.
 - "...Ohhh."

He just earned a pretty good skill. Sae-Jin continued on with the hunting while feeling deeply grateful for this unexpected present.

Early next morning.

Kim Sae-Jin headed to the Yoseon Alchemy House carrying potions and a stack of business cards.

These business cards were for the Society, The Monster.

Sae-Jin refused to use the cards issued by the government employees, instead relying on the Orc's Smithing Technique to make new cards that looked more expensive. How more expensive? He used pure silver as the material when bestowing the attribute 'Coating'.

As to why he suddenly felt the urge to act like a leader of a Society, well, even he couldn't say for sure. Was it because this was his first time ever being appointed as a leader of anything? Or did he subconsciously want to compensate for his lonely past?

Whatever the case may have been, he wanted to do his best for his Society. And after reading the history of the Trilogy online, his fervour began to burn even more fiercely. He also felt confident that, as long as he had the ability, he'd be able to make his Society surpass Trilogy in the future.

He was a person who, as a child, had lost his parents early on and never really felt the sense of belonging with anyone but now, he was thinking like this.

"...What the hell?"

Kim Sae-Jin was trudging towards the Alchemy House, but when he confirmed with his own two eyes the cordon of people crowding in front of the building's entrance, he hastily hid himself in a corner.

"Yawn~"

"D**n, there's still an hour left to go."

"Hey, just when will the new potions become available?"

"If we knew that, why would we be wasting time waiting around

like this?"

Sae-Jin wasn't too sure of the identities of these people who seemingly had set up a camp there. But he could understand why Hazeline told him to "Use the back entrance, not the front".

Lowering his posture as much as possible, Sae-Jin hurried towards the back entrance. When he arrived there like an infiltrating spy, he found a door with a simple fingerprint scanner there. He pressed his thumb on it and the door opened without any trouble.

"Hello there~"

As soon as the door opened, he was warmly greeted by the waiting and smiling Hazeline once more.

"Were you surprised?"

She pointed towards the front with her finger.

"Yes, I was. Is it, by any chance, because of my potions?"

"Yes. Thanks to the Goblin series of potions, our Alchemy House is currently being swarmed by the prospective customers like there's no tomorrow. Those people waiting out in front are all dispatched by either Knights Orders or employees from private institutions. Since we started selling on the 'first come, first served' basis, the number of people waiting outside increased so much."

Hazeline happily yammered on as she led Sae-Jin to the Manager's office.

"Aren't you going to hold an auction? I remember 'A Goblin's Kindness' was sold through auctions."

"Ah, that. We just sold the potions of low Mid to Mid grades at their ceiling prices. As you can see, our Alchemy House's premise isn't so wide enough to hold auctions every day. But well, no matter what, they just keep on selling – so if things go well, we can probably buy the building next door too!! It's all thanks to Mister Sae-Jin's hard work!"

Hazeline proudly replied as they quickly arrived at the manager's office on the second floor.

She opened the doors personally to let him in first.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?"

This was the first line she would always say when having a meeting with Sae-Jin.

"No, thank you. I'm fine."

Even though he refused her every time, she didn't give up on the coffee thing. She held a slightly regretful face as she poured herself a cup, and lightly hopped on her feet like a happy rabbit to her seat opposite Sae-Jin.

"By the way, what brings you here today?"

Hazeline asked him while stealing glances at his bag. Her gaze was like that of a cat carefully eyeing a juicy fish.

"Firstly, some potions. This time... I tried to make a new type of potion."

"A new type?"

"Yes."

He fished out a small glass bottle containing white liquid from the bag. This was the potion he invented based on the sensations he felt as well as the effects he perceived from the memories of the purification spell engraved in his head.

"This is the new potion."

As expected, the brain of a medicinal Goblin was seriously amazing.

After experiencing the magic, and if that spell could be recreated with potions, the ways to get the effects of the potion as close as possible naturally popped up in his mind. And this potion was the end result.

One could say it was because of Hazeline, since it was her magic that had left such a strong impression in his mind, which led to him making this potion.

In all honesty, he couldn't even remember the face of that bluerobe wearing Wizard all that well.

"What kind of potion is this?"

"It's 'purification'. But I fear it won't be that effective. It's... what was his name? Kim Yo-Sep? The potion's effects should be worse than that Wizard guy. There's still a lot of room to improve."

Hazeline was thoroughly shocked after hearing his words. There never had been a potion with purification effects until now.

In other words, Sae-Jin had invented a new potion. He had just helped the alchemic world to progress forward with this invention. The degree of difficulty would be like a scenario of a veteran alchemist needing to devote countless years of single-minded bloody focus just to come up with one formula.

"A potion for purification?"

"Yes."

Of course, there was a reason why such a potion hadn't been invented as of yet; as Wizards could already use the purification spell, there wasn't any need to come up with a potion with similar effects.

In short, it was a waste of time. And to put it not so nicely, rather than spending the valuable time trying to create a purification potion, it'd be smarter to brew potions from the recipes already available to the public.

"...It's nice."

However, Hazeline couldn't inform him that what he did was a waste of time.

Since the alchemist in front of her was a certifiable genius, she was sure that he didn't spend years solely trying to invent this potion. And it also didn't really matter that there was a magic spell with the same effect as the potion he invented, since it'd just add to his growing achievements anyways; plus, it wasn't like no one would buy this potion, either.

Nowadays, a fixed customer base had formed for the Goblin series – meaning, Kim Sae-Jin had become a Named potion maker – and there were people who would just sweep up everything that had the name Goblin slapped on the bottle.

"I will do my best with this one as well."

Hazeline gratefully hugged the potions he brought along with a happy expression on her face.

"Ah, there is one more thing I still need to give you. Also, I had a question as well."

"Oh? What will it be?"

After rousing her curiosity, Sae-Jin searched his inner pockets for a bit, before handing over five business cards to Hazeline.

Coated in pure silver, they were probably some of the most luxurious business cards out there.

"It's our business card."

"...Huh?"

Hazeline received the straight-cut cards dazedly, and her face soon became pretty adorable as she studied it this way and that.

On the card, the black-coloured words...

[The Founding Member of the Group ^{The Monster, Shenarine]} (TL: I thought her Wizard name was Shena? Hmm.)

...were engraved on it.

"Wah, it's really pretty. This, doesn't this feel like too nice to give away?"

Sae-Jin chuckled slightly at her words. When he searched for more information online, he learned that most "D-" Class Societies couldn't even show their business cards in other places. It was because D-was the minimum Class for the Societies that were officially recognised to be truly active.

That was also why he deliberately didn't mention the Class on the card.

"This makes me feel truly like a part of the Society, you know? I'm really tempted to work harder from now on, too."

Hazeline spoke while looking at him, her eyes arching like a fox's. It was still one of the most dazzling smiles out there.

"Haha..."

"Oh, and what was the thing you wanted to ask me about?"

"Ah, right."

At her prompt, Sae-Jin pulled out the Society's member directory.

"I want to add the Goblin Alchemist to the Society as well... Well, is it possible? Like, Hazeline and Shenarine."

"Aaaah~"

Hazeline nodded her head.

"Yes, it's possible. After writing the name down on the directory, submit it to the authorities via either internet or by physically going there. When you do that, they give you a week to reaffirm the identity of the applicant. During that time period, send in a letter written by the Goblin Alchemist along with another form of evidence, then it's all done. Since it's not uncommon to ask for anonymity when joining Societies, it's not going to be a problem."

"Can potions serve as evidence?"

"Allow me take care of that bit. When putting this purification potion out for sale, we'll just label it with 'Goblin Alchemist – The Monster Group affiliate'. And if there are any more procedures needed after that for some reason, then please, let me resolve them too."

Sae-Jin stared at the trustworthy and very knowledgeable Hazeline with a pair of sparkling eyes. As if such gazes were making her feel a bit bashful, she twisted her body a little and began showing a bit of aegyo. (TL: Aegyo "애교" means a cute display of affection often expressed through a cute/baby voice, facial expressions and gestures. Thanks, Wikipedia!!)

"Thank you so much. I'll be on my way now."

"Okay."

Kim Sae-Jin stood up. He shook her hand for the last time and prepared to leave the Manager's office.

"Uh, by the way, Mister Sae-Jin, did your height grow a bit again?"

However, her sudden words stopped him from moving.

"My height?"

"Yes. Not just your height, but your overall physical size is also... And even your face seems a tiny bit different, too. Is the effect of that potion still continuing until now?"

"...But it shouldn't be?"

"It isn't? But that can't be. My eyes.... should not be wrong, though?"

Both of them tilted their heads and stared at each other.

Panicking slightly at her strange words, Sae-Jin quickly accessed his own information window.

[Name: Kim Sae-Jin]

[Age: roughly 22 years old]

[Height: 181 cm/ Weight: 86 kg]

► Status *Human Form

[Physical Strength 83]

[Endurance 82]

[Agility 96]

[Energy Manipulation 34]

[Mana Affinity 20]

[Magic Strength 19]

[Luck 8]

"...It's true?!"

His height had grown by another 2 cm. The weight increased too.

He pondered why his height grew up so inexplicably, but soon decided that it must have been the increases in his Stats causing the change.

"I think there is still a tiny bit of effects left within me. Well... if I do get taller, then well, I guess it's all good."

That was why, he didn't think too much of it.

< 10. The Quickening (5) > Fin.

Chapter 36: The Assimilation (1)

In a month's time, the much awaited Finale of the Blacksmiths Open Invitational Tournament would begin.

– I know that there isn't enough time so I've even reduced my sleeping hours to concentrate on finishing my work.

However, the TV show covering the tournament was on air already for a while now. Once every week, it showed the daily lives and workplaces of the eleven finalists who had passed the 2nd Round of the tournament.

Of course, since Sae-Jin had to refuse being filmed, the program could only show the ten remaining participants instead.

- From the rumours, I hear that Mr. Tae-Sahn, you, have deliberately destroyed the item you prepared for the Finale of the tournament?

The guy being interviewed on screen now was Kim Tae-Sahn, son of the Korea's famed master craftsman, Kim Tae-Baek. Being treated as a rising star among the current crop of Blacksmiths, he was garnering quite a lot of fame for his warm, gentle face and an athletic physique to go with that nice face. (TL: Oh boy. Our author has made a big mistake here. Previously, he wrote "Kim Soo-Han" as the name for this son/apprentice. I guess he either forgot or didn't like the name...)

- Yes, that's correct.
- Why did you do it?
- Haha... it's as you have suspected because I believed that it was just not good enough to stand toe to toe with the Blacksmith, Mr. 'Orc'. Compared to his amazing creations, I felt that mine were uncompleted missteps lacking in so many criteria. I wanted to make something better, even if only by a little bit, so I chose to get rid of the item altogether. I feared compromising my ideals so I

had to destroy it completely.

- Oh... That's a little bit regretful, I'd say. I'm sure that weapon was still a good quality product.
- Haha... No, that's not true. Well, anyway, please follow me. Let me show you my workspace.

Carrying a gentle and friendly smile, Kim Tae-Sahn led the interviewer into his smithy.

"...Tsk."

The programme hadn't ended yet, but Sae-Jin still turned the TV off and fell into a deep thought afterwards.

That guy on the screen just now, Kim Tae-Sahn, he seemed quite an exciting and passionate fella. If that was not a calculating front put up to make himself look good, then he'd be the perfect main character filled with a great ambition. It was fine up until there. After all, having someone as talented as that guy regarding you as a rival certainly made him feel pretty good about himself.

But the issue laid with the mass media and the shifting opinion of the public at large. Since he couldn't do any sort of interviews or allow filming, the Blacksmith 'ORK' was unable to show himself, not even once.

He believed that people would naturally understand and maybe even find enjoyment out of his enigmatic actions.

Of course, they did just that, initially at least. But that was until Kim Tae-Sahn's appearance on TV.

Using the looks that even guys would find handsome, and with his uniquely passionate and humble personality, he was able to completely capture the public's imagination.

'There's no doubt that the Orc Blacksmith is the most likely candidate for the overall win. And I'm still lacking in comparison. But my aim will always be to win. In order to surpass him, I'll always try my hardest.'

That was the so-called catchphrase of Kim Tae-Sahn, the one that showed off his public persona brilliantly. Again, it was fine up to here.

The real problem, though, was the rapidly ballooning fan base of Kim Tae-Sahn. They busily talked highly of Kim Tae-Sahn's products and at the same time, ruthlessly cut down the Orc's. Their reasoning was that the unknown blacksmith was arrogant, didn't know how to be humble and all that.

Even the mass media was on the side of Kim Tae-Sahn. While the son of Kim Tae-Baek was quite friendly towards the members of the press, the mystery blacksmith, the Orc, seemed to be showing hostility towards them.

And that's how the situation was like, with only a month left until the finals. The current mood had come to a point where people thought Kim Tae-Sahn was the protagonist while the Orc was, just as the name implied, a monster he had to defeat.

Kim Tae-Sahn, who was working his b**t off to become a better person, while the Orc, who hadn't even shown his face to anyone until now.

The media and the public conceded on the fact that Orc's skills were superior, but they all wished that Kim Tae-Sahn's hard work would be enough to defeat his opponent and win.

"...Hmph."

However, Sae-Jin had no thoughts of letting this guy walk away with an easy victory. The more bad press he got and more he got bad mouthed by Kim Tae-Sahn's fans, both of his stubbornness and unwillingness to lose flared up higher, and now, his greed for victory had gotten far more severe than before.

'At least, I need something that's better than a High Quality.'

In order to win, he needed to make an item that exceeded a mid

rank, meaning at least a High Quality-ranked weapon. If he could make a Branded Goods then he'd win for sure so that would be more preferable but with his Smithing Technique only at C-, that was still too difficult for him as of now.

He thought that he needed to be at least B+ before even attempting to craft a Branded Goods.

"...No, wait a minute here."

No, he was wrong. It was not impossible, as a matter of fact.

The attribute that could allow the weapon to grow towards the rank of a Branded Goods the more it was used in hunting. Like an idiot, he had forgotten all about it, even though he had already bestowed such an attribute before.

[Growth by Absorption]

The attribute where the weapon could grow by absorbing the Mana present within the blood and flesh of the Monsters.

Of course, this attribute was incredibly difficult to bestow so he'd only achieve either the level of D or C-but, even it was only at that level, most Knights would go absolutely mad with avarice over a such weapon for sure.

However, this highly sought-after weapon would remain as a pie in the sky for the absolute majority of the Knights out there. After all, it would be no different to the weapon having a designated owner already.

'Yu Sae-Jung's preferred type of weapons was called a Broadsword, right?'

He remembered that her weapon was called the 'Lorenzo's Broadsword'. It was a weapon good enough to have its maker's name added on. Sae-Jin was confident that he could craft something even better than that.

"...Let's take this opportunity to gift her a new weapon."

Sae-Jin figured that, thanks to the first refusal agreement, the weapon would end up in Yu Sae-Jung's hands anyways so he should make it to fit her the best from the get-go.

*

===

Title: [The Wolf Guardian]

By: [Slope] (TL: Yes, the author really did write this. smh)

Have you ever seen the back of a lonely wolf?

A brightly shining creature, carrying the full moon on its back and climbing the mountains, surveying all the other lesser creatures with its golden eyes ablaze.

It's most likely the avatar of our world, symbolising the purest form of desire, a divinity more fantastic than the miracles of the gods......

•••

•••

•••

Seeing that truly dependable back, I wish to call the creature 'The Guardian'.

===

"How can these Hunters be so pathetic? Worshipping some lowly Monster... Why not just follow a proper religion or something..."

It was a certain dreamy night, with a full moon high up in the sky.

The members of the 6th ranked Knights Order in Korea as rated by the publication 'Korea Daily', Genesis were currently engaged in the middle of an 'adaptive training exercise' in the Mid Tier hunting ground.

An adaptive training was where Knights would attempt to

survive in a hunting ground that was one Tier higher than they were, while under the supervision of senior Knights possessing higher ranks. This hunting party currently consisted of three low Mid Tier Knights and a single Mid Tier Knight, who had previously boasted that he'd move up a rank pretty soon.

"But there is a reason for that, isn't there? The Werewolf that appears in the Mid Tier hunting ground has saved lots of people numerous times already. That's why those Hunters who were scared of entering the hunting ground all changed their tunes and say they feel safer now precisely because of this Werewolf."

There was a rumour floating around the Mid Tier hunting ground. A Werewolf with a rank of either upper Mid Tier or higher was supposedly roaming the Mid Tier hunting ground and rescued humans in trouble.

The rumour was classified as a total rubbish, but as the number of witnesses and survivors continued to increase, the situation was at the point where even the media was getting more interested in the story. Of course, the Mid Tier hunting ground was off-limits for the media personnel as it was deemed just too dangerous, but seeing how they conducted interviews with various witnesses, it was pretty clear to see the level of their interest in this rumour.

"Oh, man~ Are you talking about that Wolf Guardian? Do you really believe in such a thing? As a Knight? On top of that, as a Knight of the Genesis Order?"

"...No, that's not..."

A male Knight scratched the back of his neck and avoided making eye contact with the female Knight. Filled to the brim with pride for being a member of the Genesis, the female Knight narrowed her eyes at him with a dissatisfied expression.

"Even if that's true, it's still a Monster. And it's our job to kill Monsters."

"Some people are saying it's not a Monster, but a Spirit Beast. I mean, that Ebony Wolf that often appeared in the lower Tiered hunting grounds has not been seen in a while, right? So, maybe it has evolved...."

"Hey, excuse me? What kind of nonsense are you saying..."

"Enough."

When a heavy voice divided the two Knights' argument apart, they quickly lowered their heads at the same time. That's how their ill-timed war of words had been brought to an abrupt end by the person in charge.

"What the low Mid Tier Knight, Miss Soh Yeo-Jin has said is correct. Our job is to kill all the Monsters. Doesn't matter whether it's a Wolf Guardian, the Vermillion Bird of the South, the Black Turtle of the North, or the Azure Dragon of the East."

The Mid Tier Knight, who would ascend to the upper Mid Tier very soon, also known as the Saviour of the Light, Kim In-Soo put some weight behind his words as he admonished the junior Knights.

"All you guys have to do is watch how I battle Monsters in the Mid Tier hunting ground, that is all. Witnessing a battle of a Knight far greater than yourselves should be a good learning experience at the end of the day for you all."

And as soon as he finished speaking and moving his feet...

SFX for a distant roar of an unknown beast

A savage roar of a Monster shook the mountains. It sure sounded like an ominous call to all who heard it.

"Follow me!"

Right away, Kim In-Soo dashed towards the direction of the roar.

*

Kim Sae-Jin came out to hunt in the Mid Tier hunting ground. It

was to procure something called Monster parts that could improve the results of the Smithing Technique. (TL: the author wrote Monster "부산물" here. It literally means Monster by-products. Changed to "parts".)

His target was a three-horned Monster called 'Treynos'. (TL:트레이노스)

Outwardly resembling a rhinoceros, it not only had three horns on its head but also had three eyes, making it rather ugly to look at. Plus, its nature was quite violent, so it was viewed as one of the difficult Monsters to battle in the Mid Tier hunting ground.

After acquiring the ability to read information on weapons, Sae-Jin got to read the following words:

[When a horn of 'Treynos' is used as an accelerant in the Smithing Technique, the finished item's quality and attributes can be improved further.]

...Which made him realise that the horns of this Monster could greatly improve the efficiency of the Smithing Technique.

And now, Sae-Jin was able to locate a Treynos without much trouble.

SFX for a Monster growling

Strangely enough, the rhino-like Monster facing Sae-Jin only growled and remain rooted to the spot, unable to charge in towards him. Most likely, this creature had instinctively felt that the Werewolf standing in front occupied a higher rung on the food chain than itself.

"...Khrrrng."

When Sae-Jin returned a growl of his own, the Monster began to backtrack slowly.

He thought that the creature was trying to make a run for it. That's why he lowered his guard and leisurely watched it move. After all, the speed of the Werewolf would be so much faster than this b*****d trying to run away...

SFX for a loud Monster roar

However, out of the blue, the Monster began charging forward with all its might after roaring out angrily. Unfortunately for Sae-Jin, it seemed that the Monster was making a room for itself to propel forward and gain a lot of speed in the process.

Sae-Jin panicked just a little, but he knew there was really no need to dodge here. The Wolf's Claws was now at C-, and its hardness was comparable to that of the 'pronium' which was only slightly worse than the famed 'mithril'.

He knew that, just one swing of his claws would be enough to turn this rhino $b^{*****}d$ into finely-sliced slabs of meat.

He extended his claws. Sharper than seemingly any other weapon in existence, they gleamed under the pale moonlight.

SFX for thudding footsteps

And he powerfully swung them at the still-charging Monster. It was an attack so stupendously strong, the air resisting the advance of the claws got torn apart and as a result, the sky seemed to waver like the surface of the ocean.

SFX for meat being sliced apart

The rhino's abdomen area was sliced open, and the creature ended up collapsing before arriving at the feet of the Werewolf.

As he was about to recover the fallen Monster's horns...

He felt a sharp aura of Mana at his back.

"…!"

When Sae-Jin turned around, he found a man with a somewhat familiar mug standing over yonder.

Kim In-Soo.

It was that slimy dude with a not-so-nice personality from before. He was intensely glaring here with his sword drawn. It was as if he'd rush in at a moment's notice.

"...Khrrnnng."

And that's how Kim Sae-Jin and Kim In-Soo met again face to face.

< 11. The Assimilation (1) > Fin.

Chapter 37: The Assimilation (2)

"....A Werewolf."

Kim In-Soo muttered in a heavy voice.

If one was to get technical, then Sae-Jin wasn't really a Werewolf. No, he was actually an Ebony Wolf using the Beast Mode. But, seeing that the Werewolf was a rare Monster with very little facts known about it, to differentiate with such a minute detail was just not possible.

"T, team leader!! We need to run away! That Werewolf is the one I was..."

"What do you mean, run away?! That's a Monster, isn't it?" (The Female Knight.)

"No, no, that's a Spirit Beast...."

The war of words between two people threatened to explode again, but it was quickly brought under control by Kim In-Soo pulling out his sword.

"T, that... Are you planning to fight that thing, sir? Even if we evacuate, that Werewolf won't come after us, you know?"

"A Werewolf is a particularly dangerous Monster. You could say it does not belong in the Mid Tier hunting ground. And one of the jobs the Knights ranked upper Mid Tier must perform, is to defeat dangerous Monsters that doesn't belong in certain hunting grounds."

Kim In-Soo pointed his sword at the Werewolf. The tip of the blade was now directed at the head of the creature. The subordinate male Knight watching him did his best to swallow these words down: Sir, you are not upper Mid Tier yet...

"You guys can evacuate since you won't be much of a help here."

"No way! I will fight alongside with you!"

When the female Knight bravely replied and pulled out her bow from her back, Kim In-Soo nodded his head in satisfaction.

It was very hard to find an archer among the ranks of the Knights. That was because, the fired arrow had to be guided and loaded with Mana by the archer until it caused damage to the target. Of course, such a thing required a tremendous talent to perform. One needed the Affinity with Mana approaching that of a Wizard to do this, even.

"Knight Soh Yeo-Jin, cover me."

"Yes!"

Seeing the energetic duo conversing like this, the remaining two male Knights had no choice but to draw their swords as well.

'They must've gone mad.'

Kim Sae-Jin's brows tightened in irritation. Even though it was a simple change in his facial expression, on the Wolf's face it became a lot more terrifying. And that caused the subordinate Knights to stumble backwards a little.

"You don't have to worry."

Kim In-Soo assuaged the fears of his Knights and concentrated Mana on the sword. Unlike the blue colour of regular Mana, a pure white light gathered around the blade.

"Wow..."

Dazed by the spectacle, the female Knight, Soh Yeo-Jin admired the show of this purest form of white Mana.

That was the 'Saviour of the Light' in action – the miraculous Trait that supposedly increases destructive power when facing off against Monsters.

"...Khhrrrng."

As expected of the famous Trait, even Kim Sae-Jin felt that was dangerous. No, it wasn't on the level of simply being dangerous.

The Ebony Wolf was actually fearing for its life after seeing that white Mana. His trembling hands were the inescapable proof of this.

However, Sae-Jin's pride stopped him from running away.

When the instincts of a Monster, and the consciousness of a human became all mixed up, that mess had been replaced by a new type of ego.

And in this situation, the burning desire to fight suddenly exploded in his heart.

SFX for another loud roar

It was the weirdest thing. He really didn't plan to cry out like some wild animal, but his mouth opened up and the loud roar escaped out all by itself.

Right then, his consciousness blurred, and his body began moving automatically.

[The skill 'Warrior of Reversal' has activated....

"…!!"

Exploding into a storm of winds, Sae-Jin lunged forward towards the Knights. The amount of reaction time against that sudden turn of speed was almost zero. Kim In-Soo quickly covered his body with Mana, but too bad, the Wolf's target wasn't him.

SFX for a woman's scream

A high-pitched scream could be heard from his back.

The clever Wolf attacked the female Knight at the back trying to provide cover and disabled her first. The bow was sliced in half, and her slender wrist had a deep gash on it, blood spouting out from the fresh wound.

"...This f*cker!!"

Kim In-Soo and the two Knights hurriedly attacked the Wolf.

"Oryaa!!!"

With a powerful, explosive shout, the subordinates swung their swords towards Kim Sae-Jin. Unfortunately for them, the attribute 'Weapon Destruction Level E' was currently active in his body. He simply slashed at their swords with his claws.

SFX for metal bits being cut

The broken halves of blades danced into the air.

After their Mana-infused blades were broken so easily, the subordinate Knights panicked and had to take several steps back.

So, Sae-Jin stopped paying attention to them and turned towards his back where he could sense the explosive, violent Mana.

With his entire body glowing in white, Kim In-Soo slashed down with his blade at Sae-Jin.

KWAAAAAAAHANG

However, his sword only managed to overturn the ground as the Wolf had already escaped into the air and retreated to a safer distance.

"...Team leader! What should we do?"

One of the subordinates asked worriedly. Kim In-Soo took a glance at him and gave his order.

"Take Soh Yeo-Jin and evacuate. There are still potions left, so her recovery should not be difficult."

••••

"Without a weapon, you'll only get in the way. So, move!"

When the Knights hesitated and did nothing, Kim In-Soo shouted out loudly. Only then, the subordinates made their escape in earnest, while he pointed his blade at the Wolf.

"You smart b****d."

Sae-Jin's only weapon against the Mana-infused sword was his

claws.

"You sly b****d."

The intensity of the light blurring Kim In-Soo's body increased up a notch. Sae-Jin narrowed his eyes to mere slits, as the brightness made it very difficult to keep them fully open.

Right at that moment, from Kim In-Soo's body, countless blades of Mana shot towards Sae-Jin like an exploding nest of snakes.

"!"

The countless rays of light, bright enough to erase the sun, filled the sky and began raining down on the single target....

It was impossible to escape.

However, the Wolf's claws could slice apart both the corporeal and incorporeal. In other words, the claws could cut even Mana as well–

Sae-Jin slashed out at the falling drops of light rays, again and again. One could say that it all looked rather effortless, even. As soon as the Mana rays touched the claws, they powerlessly disintegrated and dissipated like the early morning fog.

It was now Kim In-Soo's turn to panic after witnessing this incredible scene. Staring at the Wolf with disbelieving eyes for a short while, he then ceased his ineffective attack and rushed towards the creature.

Klang!!

The Wolf's claws clashed angrily with the blade. The sharp screech echoed throughout the forest, with red-hot sparks shooting out from the contact point.

"Oraaaahhh!!!!" (TL: I was this close to TLing this part as OraOraOraX1000 LOL)

The sword descended, accompanied by a terrific shout. But the Wolf lightly rolled out of the way and easily dodged it.

Right after, the claws swung upwards from below.

"Keuk!"

Kim In-Soo could barely block it in time. As soon as that happened, though, he had to open his eyes really wide. He saw that on the surface of the blade in contact with the Wolf's claws, cracks began to form.

"..!!"

He quickly kicked the abdomen of the Wolf and retreated.

He could not understand what just happened. How could a measly Monster leave scars on a Mana-infused sword?

Of course, right now, time to think was a luxury he couldn't afford. The Wolf attacked him again. Kim In-Soo hurriedly dodged out of the way.

SFX for claws cutting up stuff

The air pressure from the swung claws divided distant trees in half.

Kim In-Soo stepped on the ground, hard, and thrust out his sword towards the neck of the creature.

That was the beginning of a fierce battle. A violent close-quarter combat taking place within the radius of a person's two regular steps. The swung sword was blocked by the claws, and the claws aimed at the neck missed as the target dodged with quick movements.

As the battle dragged on, their battle arena became more destroyed than before. The sword aura, seemingly missing its mark, carved apart the forest vegetation while on the ground, numerous terrifying scars were left behind.

However, the end of the fight wasn't far away.

The endurance of a human and that of a beast – there was no point in arguing, the latter simply held the advantage on that

front.

While Kim In-Soo's movement had become noticeably sluggish compared to the beginning, the Wolf was still maintaining the shocking speed without a problem.

Kim In-Soo gritted his teeth. He had to make a choice here. Hold out for a bit longer and die, or bet everything on the next attack.

He didn't agonise deeply, really.

He scraped together the very last bit of Mana still left in him and forced it onto his sword.

However...

Snap-

""

Before he could do anything, the sword couldn't hold on, and broke.

Kim In-Soo stared at the fallen bit of the blade, dazed and wordless. Then, he lifted his head to look at the Wolf.

The Wolf beast was looking back at him, waiting.

But something was different. The previously bloodshot eyes had regained the clarity of the golden iridescence, and the emotions he saw in them were calm and thoughtful. It was as if he was looking into a human's eyes.

"...What the hell just happened?"

Kim Sae-Jin alternated his gaze between Kim In-Soo and and the alert message window while failing to put a rein on his panicking mind.

He was able to grasp hold of the fading sanity drowned out by the animalistic instincts, thanks to this window popping up.

[Condition complete (1/3): Achieving victory after putting everything on the line.]

- All Stats rise by 10.
- When the remaining two conditions are met, the Ebony Wolf Form will evolve.
 - All stats related to the Wolf Form will rise.

The problem remaining now was... Kim In-Soo.

His weapon was.... quite rubbish. He was an upper Mid Tier Knight, but he was using only a Mid Quality weapon. Of course it'd break easily.

'Didn't expect him to be dirt-poor. What a shock.' (TL: author simply wrote: "He's a beggar?" It didn't sound quite right to me, so I fiddled around a bit...)

"...Kill me."

When Sae-Jin tilted his head in confusion, Kim In-Soo spat out the words of utter defeat.

"... What the hell is this guy even saying?"

Sae-Jin had no desire to kill this guy. He deliberately locked his gaze with that of Kim In-Soo's and snorted derisively before leisurely walking away.

Left alone, all Kim In-Soo could do was to follow the back of the Wolf beast with his dazed eyes.

*

Located in the wealthiest district in the city of Seoul, the headquarters of the Dawn Knights Order was famed for its stylish exterior, advantageous locations, as well as its cutting-edge training facilities. Plus, there was another source of envy and pride, in the form of an online networking app called the 'Dawn of Today' which could only be used by the current and former members of the Knights Order.

"...You do it."

"No, you do it. Why are you asking me?"

"Hey, you went to the same training camp with her!"

And now, this place was the Dawn Knights Order's training facility, where the concentration of Mana was reputedly higher than that of the mountain side thanks to the centrally-located artificial Mana Spring. Two new recruits to the Order were busy having a light argument here.

"Doesn't matter if it was training or schmucking, we never talked, not even once, you know."

The topic of their conversation was the cute girl training alone over there, Yu Sae-Jung. Always the centre of the attention whenever she came here to train, but the interest drawing upon her was a bit more special this time.

"And even if we ask her, we won't be able to join. You know this."

"Why not? They even have a Mid Tier Hunter as a member, so why can't we?"

Their interest in her this time was because of the Society she had co-founded, The Monster. Although its name was not very cool and its Class was only a D-, it was currently the most mentioned Society in the 'Dawn of Today'.

It wasn't just because the mascot of the Dawn – and its most talented Knight – Yu Sae-Jung and an unknown Wizard's participation in that Society.

No, it was because the news of the hottest trending Alchemist right now, the Goblin, joining this Society had popped up out of nowhere.

"But that's..."

"Just once. Once. She doesn't even know my face. And take a look at my mug, will ya? So? You think I stand a chance?"

"...Fuuuuu."

"Really, dude. You do this right and we join that Society, then our lives will be smooth sailing from now on. I mean, you also heard that rumour going around, right? That one, the Orc and the Goblin both being 'The Monsters'?"

"Hey, you moron. That's just an empty rumour."

And there was a strange but compelling rumour floating around as well. And that was, the Orc Blacksmith would be joining this Society as well, very soon.

Not only in the 'Dawn of Today', all the other Knights who heard of this rumour couldn't easily dismiss this notion simply because of the fact that the Society was called The Monster, plus both the Orc Blacksmith and the Goblin Alchemist had a similar naming concept.

"Whatever, dude. Just go and talk to her."

The hope of these two fellas was like so: the Society would have liked to admit more members, but since no one dared to approach, it only had four core members so far. So, if one plucked up some courage and made his intentions known, then he'd be welcomed with open arms. In other words.... something like: only the brave gets the prettiest girl.

".... Haaaaah, Fine. Wait here."

The cool and handsome-looking male Knight sighed out grandly and walked towards Yu Sae-Jung. His gait was stiff like an old robot thanks to him being filled with nervousness.

His friend tried to rein in his nervous heart and waited for the arrival of the good news.

"Hoowoo..."

Another intake of deep breath.

Arriving before Yu Sae-Jung, he began speaking in a shaky voice.

"Uh... I heard that, you, you have formed, uh, S, S, Society...."

And... Yu Sae-Jung expertly replied as if she had experienced the exact same situation dozens of times already.

"The leader of the Society isn't me but Mister Kim Sae-Jin. If you wish to join, please seek him out."

".....Yes."

The poor guy heard that as a complete rejection.

He walked back to his friend with heavy footsteps and crossed his arms in an X in front of his chest. And they grandly sighed out at the same time.

"...Why are there so many requests to join the Society?"

Yu Sae-Jung took a glance at the two and tilted her head. She couldn't figure out why they wanted to join a small Society with only three members. She didn't understand, as she had stopped using her phone altogether since it was around the time for her school exams.

Of course, as Yu Sae-Jung, she was fully aware of the true value of building a personal bridge with her. But wasn't this Society simply formed to foster amity and goodwill? Even Kim Sae-Jin himself did say that he formed this Society to get the rank promotion.

But now, she was in the middle of training. She just didn't have enough time, as after the training, she'd study for the exams.

So, she removed all thoughts related to the Society and concentrated on training for now.

And exactly one hour later, Yu Sae-Jung could finally hear the answer to the mystery from the butler that had come to take her home.

"...Huh?"

"You didn't know?"

"I'm studying for the exams, you know. I'm just too busy studying and training, so.... But it's for real? Really real?"

"So, I guess you really didn't know. Two days ago, a new potion in the Goblin series called 'A Goblin's Purification' came out. And on the label, it was written 'From the Alchemist affiliated with The Monster'."

""

Yu Sae-Jung's expression was that of an utter shock as she leaned against the back of a chair.

< 11. The Assimilation (2) > Fin.

Chapter 38: The Assimilation (3)

Kim Sae-Jin was carefully packing the member's gifts for Yu Sae-Jung inside a rectangular box. The contents were potions made by the Goblin Alchemist, the business cards, as well as a letter expressing his gratitude.

SFX for mobile phone vibrating

As he was observing the status of the box that was rapidly becoming rather classy, the phone went off. And speaking of the devil, it was Yu Sae-Jung calling.

His lips slightly arcing in a grin, he picked up the phone.

"Hello?"

"It's me, Oppa. Is it true?"

From a certain point onwards, the way she called him went a slight change. Sae-Jin was seriously chuffed about that. This was the proof their friendship had deepened, after all.

"What is? You mean, the alchemist?"

It was two days ago when the potion 'A Goblin's Purification' went on sale and the world finding out about the Goblin Alchemist joining his Society. But Yu Sae-Jung was a blood descendant of the Dawn dynasty, so there was just no way she was not aware of this important fact...

"Yes, that. So, it's true? How... no, that's not it, what... ah, he... how did you get to meet the Goblin Alchemist?"

Well, she genuinely didn't know. Her voice was trembling from the shock.

"Well, that... it's a private matter so I can't talk about it. You know how it is. How sensitive alchemists are towards... their privacy."

He debated on whether to tell her the truth or not. But in the

end, he just made sh*t up since he figured that the situation wasn't right for him to come out and say, "Well actually, I'm the Goblin Alchemist" here.

"Yeah... if that's so, well... I guess it can't be helped."

"Ah, right. I'm wrapping your presents right now. They should arrive at your place by tomorrow."

"Really? Thanks!"

"No probs."

"Ah, by the way..."

Sae-Jin dropped the phone hurriedly and went back to wrapping the gift box. It seemed like some sort of sound was leaking out from the phone, but he ignored them – since he found gift wrapping more fun.

*

It was decided that the grand Finale of the Blacksmith tournament would be held at the large lecture hall located in the building of the Dawn Knights Order.

And now, today was the much awaited final round of judging, with over 500 audience members as well as five professional judges – all invited here to participate in the process. Inside the waiting area backstage, the pro judges were sitting together, discussing among themselves the weapons submitted for the finals.

"I hear the Orc is not going to show up for today as well? Tsk, tsk... We say nice things about him for a little bit, and he's become so arrogant already..."

Famous in Korea for his fussy personality, master craftsman Yu Jo-Hyung spoke in a slightly dissatisfied voice.

"We don't know that. It could very well be that he's uncomfortable with appearing in public. Let's hold off our judgements until later on, shall we?" (TL: the author literally said,

"let's not try to view with our coloured glasses on.")

Another judge, the Chairman of the Blacksmiths Association, Kim Tae-Hyung admonished Yu Jo-Hyung in a benevolent voice.

"That's right. It's also possible that he's focusing solely on crafting weapons. I'm already getting hyped thinking about what he has in store for us today."

This time it was Kim Yu-Rin's turn. Her smile was so dazzlingly charming that it had the power to make the face of a particularly fussy old man flush in a healthy colour.

"Keheum. If that's the case.... However, I really do think that Kim Tae-Sahn will walk away a winner today. He has come very much prepared. The stuff he brought today made me seriously wonder whether he had received his father's help or not."

"Really? What about Mister Orc?"

"Orc? It wasn't a detailed look-see, but I did get a quick peek at it. However, even though it looks like a good quality item... it kind of seemed plain to me. Back then, Hotly Burning Flames? Yeah, I didn't see any of those crazy special thingy add-ons this time. That's why, I think Kim Tae-Sahn boy will win this one."

Yu Jo-Hyung stroked his lengthy beard and continued to predict Kim Tae-Sahn's victory.

"Is there a something special about the weapon of the Blacksmith Kim Tae-Sahn?"

"Of course. Even I was re~ally surprised. You will too, when you personally see it for yourself. Oh, right. That Kim Tae-Sahn boy looked like he really wanted to meet you. How about it, will you have a dinner with him after today's event is all done and dusted?"

Suddenly, Yu Jo-Hyung threw at her a request rather unexpectedly. Since she couldn't outright refuse a master craftsman just like that, Kim Yu-Rin could only scratch the back of her neck and smiled weakly.

"You also saw him, no? He's a very good egg, that one. He's got a good personality and...."

"We will be starting with the rehearsals now~"

With a nice timing, the producer entered the room and unknowingly got in between her and Yu Jo-Hyung. She promptly stood up from her seat. Her expression was one of relief.

"Oh! Already? Shall we get going?"

"Keheum."

Watching the back of Kim Yu-Rin hurriedly walk away, Yu Jo-Hyung let out a fake cough as if he found the matter regrettable.

"....Mm?"

When Kim Yu-Rin opened the door and left the waiting room, an unexpected woman was waiting for her.

A cute girl who was continuously checking her appearance on the small mirror. It was Yu Sae-Jung, who was becoming rather famous among the current crop of Knights nowadays.

Whatever was making her unhappy, Yu Sae-Jung's face was in a deep frown as she surveyed the reflected image until, she felt the pair of eyes gazing at her and, Wheeck, she turned her head in a hurry.

"...Oh."

And she let out a small gasp. She quickly hid the mirror and slowly approached Kim Yu-Rin. Seeing that her face was completely frozen stiff and her legs were trembling pitifully, one could easily tell that she was beyond being incredibly nervous right now.

"He, hello, no, no, h, how dO YOU DO!"

The nervousness had gripped her vocal chords and as the words struggled to break free, she ended up inadvertently shouting them aloud. In that moment, all focus was gathered here, and when she realised what she had done, her face became ashen.

"Nononono, that is..."

"Hello there. How do you do. I've heard a lot about you."

Kim Yu-Rin smiled warmly and offered her hand for a shake first, unperturbed.

".....Aah."

She was so mesmerisingly beautiful, even from another woman's point of view. That's why Yu Sae-Jung stared unconsciously at Kim Yu-Rin before snapping awake and hurriedly taking the offered hand.

"I, i, it's my pleasure! I, I, I am, uh, my name is Yu Sae-Jung. Yes!"

She was acting quite different from the composed and thoughtful appearance she always put up until now, the one that didn't match up with her age. Sae-Jung was so tightly wound-up as she talked with Kim Yu-Rin. Cold sweat was pouring out of her entire body, and her heart was pounding away like crazy.

This situation was like a dream to her.

The person she had admired the most in her life, was standing right before her...

"Yes. I've heard a lot of good things about you. You've accomplished something amazing – you're already a low Mid Tier at such a young age."

"Ah, yesyesyes, yes. Yes. Ah, I'm Miss Yu-Rin's, biggest fan, me, Yu Sae-Jung. No, wait. I was in the Elementary school, when I was really, really young, I became your fan..."

Yu Sae-Jung could not remember what happened afterwards.

Only that, around five minutes later, she found herself walking towards the section for the audience panel while being supported by a stranger. The lengthy Open Invitational Tournament was about to come to a close with the commencement of the Grand Finale.

However, if it wasn't the 1st place or the 2nd place finish, it didn't matter anymore. Even the professional judges and the participating blacksmiths thought this way. Hell, out of the eleven finalists, seven of them had already threw in the towel after realising their severe lack of talents.

"...And now, among these four items present here today, only one can climb to the glorious position of the victor's throne!"

As soon as the live broadcast began, the emcee spoke the obligatory opening line.

The audience members began clapping, and the five judges carefully studied the items covered in veil while maintaining a solemn attitude.

"These are the judges for this round. From the far left, we have the Raven Knights Order's Highest Tier Knight, Miss Kim Yu-Rin..."

The emcee made simple introductions for the five judges, and the judging process began in earnest right after that.

The first item was a wooden sword made out of black wood, aka Ceylon ebony. It was a puzzling decision to make a sword out of a wood, but since the black wood could be infused with a lot of Mana, as long as it was manufactured well, it was an item that could be rated above Mid Quality.

"It's good. But, it's a little regretful that it's too dependant on the Knight's abilities."

This black wooden sword was knocked out of the running with Kim Yu-Rin's judgements.

Next up, was a scimitar made out of corundum. With the blade's

body bending like a snake and the smooth blade edge seemingly boasting an unmatched sharpness – if it was the last year's tournament, then it'd be good enough to compete for the first place but this time, it could only earn the disappointing appraisal of 'it's good but lacks any special traits and is just a bit too plain'.

"And now, this is it! This is Blacksmith Kim Tae-Sahn's item."

It was now the beginning of the real battle. Judges and audience members waited with slightly bated breaths as Kim Tae-Sahn approached his weapon with confident steps.

"Please, give us an explanation on your weapon."

Kim Tae-Sahn nodded at the emcee's words. Then, he removed the veil draped over his item. First, at the sight of elegant and luxurious appearance, both the audience and the judges let out a collective gasp of admiration.

"This is a B*****d Sword I made by combining malachite and adamantite. When Mana is infused into the blade, Mana will concentrate on the surface of the blade and then change into blue crystal."

The explanations might have been simple, but this sword was the kind of a weapon that would truly shine when in hands of its wielder. Utterly confident, Kim Tae-Sahn lifted the sword up and brought it towards the judges.

"Ho-oh... As expected of the master craftsman's apprentice, is that right?"

"It's very good. Excellent. I can't find any faults."

"It is indeed a very good weapon. Is it alright to infuse it with Mana?"

During all the praises of the judges, the Highest Tier Knight Kim Yu-Rin grabbed the hilt and asked. As that was what Tae-Sahn had wanted from the beginning, he nodded his head without hesitation.

"Of course. Go right ahead."

With his consent, she poured her Mana into the sword. As he had said, the blade with the blue Mana shimmering on it, changed to a crystalline form. The already pretty exterior became even more fantastical, and there was clearly no need to even test the hardness of the Mana crystal.

This was, at minimum, a High Quality item.

"...It's perfect."

When Kim Yu-Rin dazedly muttered, Kim Tae-Sahn nodded in pure satisfaction.

Other judges didn't stray too far from her assessment, either. Especially Yu Jo-Hyung, who had been praising Tae-Sahn even from the backstage, was now saying stuff like the boy had climbed up to the level of an artisan and poured out more thick praises.

"And, finally.... this is the last item!"

As the rising tension was reaching the fever pitch, the turn for the Orc Blacksmith had finally come.

"Mister Orc has decided not to attend the final round, unfortunately. He has said that it's because of personal issues."

Since the Orc blacksmith didn't show up, the emcee took the reins of unveiling the item. He placed the veiled chest in the middle of the stage where all eyes from the audience members and the judges could see it clearly.

And then, Sharararak...

Underneath the veil, a weapon lied. The adjective 'beautiful' suited this weapon perfectly.

On the hilt, blue and red colours danced in complete harmony, and on the surface of the blade, the intricate and artful carvings which were widely accepted as the trademark of the Orc's Forge K, were clearly visible. The pure white blade wasn't too long nor was

it too short, making it perfect for both cutting and stabbing.

The world fell into complete silence. It wasn't as extravagant as Kim Tae-Sahn's work, but as far as beauty was concerned, this one was superior by miles. As some wise old men once said, true beauty could be appreciated by anyone without the express needs for words – and just like that saying, this sword appeared deceptively simple on the surface, but it's beauty was truly elegant and beguiling.

"....It's gorgeous."

When the silence continued on for two minutes, Kim Yu-Rin forcibly opened her mouth to say something in order to avoid a broadcasting incident.

"Euheum. The exterior does look nice. However. It doesn't look any special from its looks only. Isn't the blacksmith suppose to come out here and start explaining? If this sword has no special traits, then it's not so much different from that corundum scimitar, no?"

Next up was Yu Jo-Hyung. He was doing his best to maintain a dismissive facial expression.

"That is true. The Orc Blacksmith has said that, even though he can't appear physically, he will talk to us via telephone. Sir? If you're watching this live broadcast, please give us a call with the number on the screen."

After 20 seconds of waiting, the producer gave a signal that the call had been connected.

"Hello, there."

"Is this the Orc Blacksmith?"

"Yes, indeed, that's me."

His voice was a pass. Its tone was quite bassy and warm, which made it pleasant to listen to.

"You have a nice voice, sir."

"Hahaha... thank you very much."

Even his smooth laughter sounded nice. The emcee nodded his head and then asked the blacksmith on the phone to describe his weapon.

"This weapon.... does not possess a special trait like Mister Kim Tae-Sahn's weapon."

"Keheum."

Even though the explanation had only just begun, one of the judges spat out a dissatisfied fake cough. There was no need for anyone to check that it was from Yu Jo-Hyung.

"However, this weapon is carrying a sincere wish of mine."

"What is your wish, sir?"

The emcee asked, clearly expectant. A weapon with a story attached to it was always going to be an easier sell. (Note to editor: the author wrote here "A weapon with a story is always right." Which one should I go with? I frankly like my interpretation more...)

"My wish is that, I'd like to see my weapon grow together with its owner. When the weapon's owner grows stronger, then it is inevitable that the weapon has to be discarded. Since, if it's not thrown away, the weapon would end up halting the progress of its owner, so I believe the weapon would want to be thrown away as well."

The Orc Blacksmith slowly spoke out. As his strangely pleasant voice spread around, the people gathered in the lecture hall for the Finale became deeply immersed in his story.

"What happened next? Did your wish come true?"

"Yes. Fortunately, my weapon can grow together with its owner now."

In that moment, chaos broke out in the hall.

A weapon that could grow? No one had ever heard of such a weapon before.....

"I, is it possible to prove such a thing?"

It was Kim Tae-Sahn who shouted out first. He was feeling confident of his victory even after seeing the Orc's item, so understandably, he was feeling genuinely on the edge right now.

"A weapon that can grow?! What kind of nonsense are you trying to..."

"Hahaha... Why not let one of the Knights present there infuse Mana with the sword? The sword will emit a matching resonance with the infused Mana."

The Orc Blacksmith replied calmly. Kim Yu-Rin stood up from her seat and grabbed the hilt. Kim Tae-Sahn stared at her with a deeply tense expression.

"All I have to do is to infuse Mana with it?"

"Yes. You'll sense the change."

Yu-Rin infused her Mana with the sword. It was absorbed cleanly.

And right away, she understood what this resonance the blacksmith was talking about. The blade was serenely humming in tune with her Mana – as if it was singing a song.

"You shouldn't hold it for too long. It might recognise you as its new owner."

At those words, Yu-Rin quickly retracted her Mana.

"...It's incredible."

Kim Yu-Rin lifted her head to the sky and dazedly spoke.

Kim Sae-Jin, who was watching all this happen on TV, quietly chuckled to himself.

The attributes he had bestowed to the weapon were C level [Growth by Absorption] and [Owner Recognition].

Thanks to the horns of Treynos, he could imbue these two attributes to the sword that could perfectly recognise its owner and grow together with him or her.

With a great timing, the TV cameras picked up on the face of Yu Sae-Jung, her eyes full of desire as she fixed her burning gaze on the weapon.

Even the director seemed to know just who the new owner of this sword was going to be.

< 11. The Assimilation (3) > Fin.

Chapter 39: The Assimilation (4)

And now... the only thing left to do after all the weapons' introductions and the subsequent critiquing were over with, was the announcement of the final result.

Kim Tae-Sahn was carrying a somewhat bitter smile, framed by a facial expression of a man who had already accepted his fate.

He had put in a lot of effort to win. Some people might think less of him, but he also had played up for the cameras as well. He wanted to make sure of his chances with the audience members, in the case where the quality of his output would be only slightly worse than that of the Orc's.

He even used his father's name to enter. That's how much he wanted to win. As a son of Kim Tae-Baek, a defeat didn't suit Kim Tae-Sahn at all.

However, he was up against a weapon that could freaking grow. A notion he'd never even heard of in his entire life, a concept so utterly revolutionary. Considering that, it'd be weird if he had won this tournament instead. If he had won, then all the goodwill he built with the public would all be blown away in a blink.

So, all he could do now was to just open-heartedly accept his defeat.

The Orc Blacksmith was at least twice more talented than he was.

Kim Tae-Sahn's pride wouldn't allow for anything higher than a 'twice' but still, he nodded his head and accepted his defeat today.

"And now.... The winner is!"

The emcee pointed towards the giant screen standing erect in the middle of the stage with a loud voice.

The moment the Orc Blacksmith told the story of his sword, there was no tension left in the finals. Well, the result was inevitable, after all.

That's why, when the winner was declared, everyone present here could quietly accept it.

"The winner is, the Orc Blacksmith's 'Growing Broadsword'!!"

Confetti exploded and from the floor, flames rose up. The fireworks on the stage went off loudly, but seeing that the winner wasn't up on the said stage ready to receive the trophy, it was rather... an odd thing to witness.

"....Well then. Now... yes. And now, we will hear the thoughts of the winner, the Orc Blacksmith. Can you... please give us a call?"

Although it was cumbersome, the producers couldn't do anything about it since the Orc had requested for this type of arrangement beforehand.

Fortunately, the Blacksmith was quick to make his call.

"Sir, congratulations on your win!"

"Haha... Thank you. I am really grateful."

His voice sounded calm, but the happiness hidden beneath still managed to leak out a little.

"You could call this result an overwhelming victory, so how do you feel?"

"Mm... I wouldn't call it overwhelming. The other weapons competing against mine, you could easily spy their creators' dedication and hard work in them. The winner had to be chosen, but the value of their hard work is all equally high in my mind."

It was a simple and humble reply. The emcee was about to end it on that feel-good note, when Yu Jo-Hyung suddenly raised his hand.

"Ah, a member of the judging panel wishes to ask you a question. Will that be fine with you?"

"Yes, it's fine."

Receiving the go-ahead, Yu Jo-Hyung did one of his fake coughs first.

"By any chance, the attribute you spoke of – the growth of the weapon – when that attribute is proven to be nothing more than a falsehood.... what will you do? You have stayed anonymous all this time and it's hard to place our trust in you. Isn't it possible that, in order to win the prize money, you are lying right now?"

"Yes, that is possible."

Although it was a pointed attack loaded with hostility, the Orc Blacksmith still calmly replied.

"And that's why I shall not ask for the prize money, nor for my weapon's, until its new owner can unequivocally prove that it is indeed, real."

It was an assured answer that cut off all suspicions. Yu Jo-Hyung was still not satisfied, but since there was nothing he could retort against, he had to concede here.

"Oh, wait. Then, can I ask you something as well?"

This time, it was Kim Yu-Rin.

"Yes, of course."

"Are you planning to craft more weapons and sell them from now on? If so, then, what are your plans on the circulation of your goods?"

She asked short and simple questions, but as a person sitting on a high position in her Knights Order, they were of incredibly importance.

"Yes, I am planning on it. However, as for the circulation.... I'll have to think about it first. I actually believe that, instead of making weapons and waiting for the right people to show up, a weapon should be crafted to match the individuals instead."

As soon as she heard that, she could not hide her shock and licked her lips, salivating. Almost all the Knights present here was doing the exact same thing as her.

Most well known blacksmiths, whether that be an artisan or a master, first crafted their weapons and then received the potential owner candidates for them. Hell, some rumours even said that one or two Knights were bribing the blacksmiths in order to acquire the weapons.

This was partly because there was ego involved, but also mostly because, it was indescribably difficult to tailor-make a weapon to suit its user. As for the ego bit, blacksmiths were the type of people that would destroy a half-year of their own hard work if it was not to their liking – so, to make something that followed the tastes of others were a bit....

"T, that's great. Say, would you like to be my friend?"

These sincere words belonged to Kim Yu-Rin and she was dead serious about her intentions. But the audience members and filming crew thought it was a humorous joke and they all burst out into a laughter.

Staring at them with a confused expression, Kim Yu-Rin was about to open her mouth to say she wasn't kidding, but before that, she got cut off by the loud shout from an audience member.

Since there was no mic near this person, the voice ended up being small, but when hearing it, one could tell it was about the hot new story regarding the Society, The Monster.

"Ah, just now, that person asked a question even I was curious about. By any chance, do you know of the Society, The Monster? The one Mister Goblin the Alchemist had joined."

"...Yes, I've heard of them."

The emcee asked without too much thought. Since the rumour was treated as completely groundless, his voice lacked much

sincerity. Instead, a small amount of lightheartedness found its way in there.

"Since both you and him use a similar naming concept, people are wondering if you are planning to join this Society as well. What are your thoughts regarding this matter?"

"Is that so? Hmm..."

Unexpectedly, the Orc Blacksmith didn't answer right away. At this sudden delay in answer, even those who dismissed the rumour off-handedly had to wait with bated breaths and concentrate.

The Orc allowed the expectations to bubble on for another thirty seconds, until he finally chuckled and made his reply.

"It might be interesting to join them after all. If I do decide to join, then anyone wishing to purchase my wares should send their inquiries to the Society, The Monster. If there's nothing else, then, please excuse me."

The call from the blacksmith ended with the words that said there was a possibility. And the entire lecture hall became deathly silent right after.

Well, it was a fresh shock to the system, after all.

*

Sae-Jin hurriedly checked online all the articles and the reactions of the public that were uploaded in the blink of an eye.

He was exhausted, but still, he found it fun to sift through the stuff put up by the shocked media and the public.

'The appearance of a Treasure-quality weapon.'

'A growth-type weapon: is it authentic?'

'A weapon that follows its master; who will be its new owner?'

'The Orc Blacksmith presents a new paradigm shift.'

These were all rather extremely shameless clickbaity headlines,

but undoubtedly, they still held some strange persuasive power to make people click on them regardless.

However, after some point in time had passed, articles about the weapon got buried in another topic altogether. And that topic was... The Orc Blacksmith joining The Monster.

The reactions were explosive. It was unknown how they found out his address, but reporters began showing up in front of Kim Sae-Jin's house.

"Don't worry about it. I've sent people over. They will sort out the mess."

"Mm. Thanks, for everything."

He was getting sick and tired of journalists camping outside his house and knock on his door every twenty minutes or so – then, Yu Sae-Jung called him with great timing.

As expected of the Dawn Knights Order, just like she mentioned, the bodyguards arrived in less than three minutes and swept the annoying reporters away.

"But you also saw the programme, right? Is it true that the Orc Blacksmith is joining our Society?"

"Oh, that? Uh, that is.... actually, the Goblin Alchemist said that he knew the Orc Blacksmith personally. So there is a connection, right, I'm not sure yet. I need to ask first."

Once the lie started, it could not be stopped anymore; and the more he lied, the more comfortable he felt about it. And when he thought about seeing all those shocked faces... well, wasn't this a slightly rotten habit he was developing here?

"R, really? If he really joins the Society later on, can I ask him for a favour?"

"Well, why not? As long as there's enough compensation for it, that is."

"I've more than enough money for that purpose."

"....Of course, you do."

Their topic of conversation was the Orc Blacksmith. She yapped on and on about how she would be the new owner of the sword that could grow stronger.

"Oh, and Oppa, Can we have a meal together later on? Miss Kim Yu-Rin asked me if we could eat together sometime..."

Out of the blue, Yu Sae-Jung changed the topic with a slightly excited voice.

"Mm? Me too?"

"Y, yes. Oppa, too..."

Her reply sounded as if she was slightly unhappy about something. Maybe she wanted to enjoy a meal together with Kim Yu-Rin all by herself or some such.

"Is it okay for me to go?"

"Well, yes. Miss Kim Yu-Rin specifically said, 'with Mister Kim Sae-Jin, too' so.... Uh, I'll just inform her that Sae-Jin Oppa is just too busy and we will have to eat without you. I'm sure she will understand!!"

Her voice sounded rather energetic as she said these words. So naturally, he felt quite mischievous and wanted to pull a prank on her.

"Ah, is that so? It's fine. I can make it."

""

A sudden bout of eerie silence descended on the line. Kim Sae-Jin worked very hard to restrain the laughter that was threatening to leak out and continued to speak.

"When will it be?"

"...Next week Monday."

Sae-Jung spat out unhappily.

"Got it. Well, see you then."

He replied matter of factly and ended the call.

*

"…!!"

Kim Sae-Jin in the Ebony Wolf Form suddenly opened his eyes. His golden eyes gleamed brightly.

An indescribable aura was surrounding his body. As it gave off the serious case of an odious sensation, he quickly assumed the Human Form.

He glanced at the clock. It was now 9 AM. He went to bed at 1 AM, so he had a normal sleep. then.

'But why...'

Some parts of his body, here and there, were aching – especially his joints and his nails, they were in dull pain. As if, there were bruises from receiving impacts.

"...What is going on?"

Sae-Jin tilted his head slightly, but didn't worry about it anymore. He just went downstairs to the basement and drank a vial of low Mid grade recovery potion instead. The aches and pain in his joints dissipated in an instant.

Climbing back upstairs while feeling satisfied, he lay down on the couch and switched the TV on.

The first item on the 9 o'clock morning news was about the Orc Blacksmith. Smiling contentedly, he listened to the news anchor's voice.

- The public, Knights Orders and the leaders of financial and political world have all agreed that the new master craftsman who can represent the country will be born and have expressed their growing excitement...

As he heard the anchor's unbridled praises, he could reaffirm the fevered reception and the excitement of the public at large he read online yesterday.

And in this bliss, he slowly sank into a siesta. His body felt strangely fatigued.

When he fell deep into the slumber...

The news coverage changed suddenly.

It was a breaking news.

- ...!! Oh, we have a breaking news. At three o'clock this morning, a crime of murder has been committed in the area of Hyeongseong in Gwangwon Province. The evidence found in the victim's house and the unnatural state of the body prompted the investigators to speed up the autopsy, and as a result, the identity of the victim is now known as a Vampire. Currently, the investigators are assuming that this is the work of the Mercenary, Lycan...

< 11. The Assimilation (4) > Fin.

Chapter 40: A Development That's Not a Progress (1)

For the following week after the programme had aired, Sae-Jin was overwhelmed with requests to join the Society.

The moment he approached the Monster field, people stuck onto him like glue.

And the identities of each and every one of these folks were just incredible. All of them were some kind of big shots in their chosen field of profession – Mid Tier Knights, upper Mid Tiers, B rank Wizards, etc, etc...

When he refused, there were one or two high-nosed snobs glaring at him with eyes that said, how dare a lowly you refuse me?! But well, that was understandable as they all had status out in the society.

However, Kim Sae-Jin refused them all. He didn't want to admit those folks with intentions all too clear to see, and muddy the waters of his own Society like that.

Yu Sae-Jung was the same in this regard. But she had her bodyguards to prevent any trouble approaching her beforehand, so she had encountered far less trouble compared to what Sae-Jin had to go through.

Oh, and also, totally out of the blue, he received a lot of requests for investments. Not only from the Knights Orders, but Wizard Towers and private corporations, as well as even from certain politicians.

Some of them strangely went as far as to threaten him with if you don't take this money, things will become ve~ry difficult for you down the line, capiche? (TL: no, the author didn't use that word. I just wrangled it in there, cuz, you know, sounds about right.)

Of course, Sae-Jin still refused all of them.

However – there was this one thing that he could not refuse outright as his instincts stopped him from doing so.

And that was making an appearance on TV.

The idea came from the producer of the programme, The Qualities of a Knight, who packaged the scenes of the real Knights hunting Monsters as entertainment and created a huge hit show in the process.

Sae-Jin was unable to cleanly refuse the guy, as not only the programme itself had been a big ratings draw, but as a child watching TV with his mother, he did hold a secret yearning to appear on it. So, he just told the producer guy that he'd think about it and left it there like that.

And now, it was a late afternoon as the sun began to slowly set in the West. Today was also the promised day for the dinner with Kim Yu-Rin, too. Sae-Jin was waiting for Yu Sae-Jung in front of his house after she said she'd come and fetch him.

He was feeling a bit nervous as the memories of the day he had rescued Kim Yu-Rin continued to drift in and out of his head.

So, he tried to distract himself by playing with his phone when, from the distance, a shiny and very black limo glided towards his position.

"...Could that be hers?"

Sae-Jin fell into a slight dilemma. If he was being escorted to a high-class party, sure, but since it was just a nice little dinner, such a lengthy limo seemed a bit overkill to him. Wouldn't such a thing become cumbersome, instead?

Unfortunately, the limo did stop in front of Sae-Jin.

" "

As Sae-Jin stood there and blankly stared at the car, the window for the backseat slid down and the face of Yu Sae-Jung peeped out from the opening.

"What are you doing, Oppa? Get in."

"...Oh. Yeah, sure..."

With a reluctant reply, he opened the back door and climbed inside.

The interior was even more spectacular. The size in here felt like it would not lose out to his old one room apartment. Even the seats were soft and fluffy, as if he was parking his b**t over a cloud or something.

"...This is all really amazing. Is this all thanks to the 'Magic engineering' thing?"

Sae-Jin spoke as he poked at the seat cushions.

"Yes, probably."

She replied in a relaxed manner and leaned against the backrest. But Sae-Jin couldn't do that. So, he just twisted his body around like a slightly uncomfortable shrimp.

"By the way, what's that?"

Pretending to not know, he pointed at a box laying securely on Sae-Jung's lap. She carried a very proud expression as she opened the box.

"It's the 'Growing Broadsword', you see. It will serve as my main weapon from now on. And Mister Orc the Blacksmith even wrote me a letter as well."

"He did?"

He did write a letter for Yu Sae-Jung. He asked her to use the sword well. He also added that, when his skills improved, he'd also take care of maintaining the weapon in the future as well.

She had a very satisfied expression, so he decided to feel satisfied as well.

The venue was a high-class restaurant located near the Raven Knights Order. Sae-Jin had never ever set foot in an eatery where one could not enter without an invitation before in his life.

He felt a little, no, make that a lot, pressured by this. Such a luxurious atmosphere didn't suit him one bit.

He saw a guy wearing a formal attire that could easily have cost more than a few thousand bucks, and a woman wearing a superfancy dress. Among all the diners here, he spotted famous politicians, Knights, as well as celebrities he could recognise just by looking at their faces.

From the tops of their heads to the tips of their toes, from the clothes they wore and their mannerisms – him and this whole space was at perfect odds with one another.

Of course Sae-Jin would feel depressed.

"Lady Yu Sae-Jung and Sir Kim Sae-Jin, your reservations have been confirmed."

Two of them followed the professional guidance of the waiter and sat down in front of a huge table.

"Oppa, why do you keep looking around like that?"

Yu Sae-Jung stopped browsing the menu and asked him, looking somewhat puzzled.

"...They are staring at us."

He was already feeling uncomfortable, and now all these famous people were looking over here. He so wanted to rip off the cheap chequered shirt he was wearing right this instant.

"Mm, you're right. It's probably because of the Society, I think? Since even the Orc Blacksmith has joined us... Well, I guess it can't be helped, really."

On another side note, Yu Sae-Jung seemed very much moved by

the letter Kim Sae-Jin sent along with the Broadsword, and had become a die-hard fan of the Orc Blacksmith. Of course, it was somewhat pitiable that she had no idea the very blacksmith was sitting right in front of her at this moment.

"By the way, will Sir Blacksmith really join our Society?"

And before he knew it, the way she called the Society had changed to a more agreeable our Society. Sae-Jin smiled slightly.

"Not sure yet. But I think I can get in touch with him."

He answered her in a nonchalant manner. Of course he could get in touch with himself. Wasn't that the most obvious thing in the world? Maybe it was just too obvious and that could be a problem, but still.

"Wah... Can I, can I get in touch with him too?"

"Well, that's, uh... oh, by the way, surely you can find out the identity if you wanted to, can't you?"

Sae-Jin asked her as if there was some doubt there.

If it was the Dawn's information network, they should be able to uncover the identities of both the Goblin Alchemist as well as the Orc Blacksmith. After all, there would inevitably be a paper trail left somewhere.

No, for the people of Dawn, it would be far more harder to accept the truth that all three individuals happened to be a single person – Kim Sae-Jin.

"That's true, but I think that's no different from slicing the belly of the goose that lays the golden eggs. It'd be our loss if the potential relationship sours because we ignored his wishes to remain anonymous."

That was a wonderful answer. He quickly nodded his head.

But then, all of a sudden, Yu Sae-Jung seemed to have remembered something – she opened her eyes real wide and

pushed her upper body real close.

"Ah, right! When you get to speak to the Blacksmith, you must pass on this message. Us at Dawn are deliberately protecting the identity of the Blacksmith as we speak. There are other Knight Orders and corporations that don't think the same as us out there."

"...Uh, sure thing. Got it."

After finishing her business, she slowly leaned back against her chair.

Sae-Jin dumbly stared at her. As they became more friendly, she felt like a different person from the initial impressions.

There was still that side of being more mature than her age, but without a doubt, there also existed the side that was cheerful and overflowing with emotions, just like any other girls her age. It was a refreshingly charming side, for sure.

However, she was still underage, though.

"...Ah! She's here!"

Yu Sae-Jung pointed behind his back and whispered loudly. Kim Sae-Jin also turned his head to look.

There she was, Kim Yu-Rin – wearing a coat-style armour.

Just like how Sae-Jin had acted earlier, she too seemed flustered as she went past the focused stares to arrive at the table.

"H, hello there!"

Yu Sae-Jung abruptly stood up first.

"Oh, hello there. Ah, the thing is... I came here straight after finishing up work so I couldn't find the chance to change my clothes."

Kim Yu-Rin spoke apologetically as she sat down next to Yu Sae-Jung.

"How do you do, I'm Kim Sae-Jung."

"Hello. I've heard many good things about you. It's a pleasure."

After sharing a light greeting with Sae-Jin, Kim Yu-Rin browsed the menu before her jaw magnificently hit the floor.

"Uh.... They are all quite expensive, aren't they?"

That was totally unexpected from the point of view for the other two present here. After all, Kim Yu-Rin was a Highest Tier Knight employed by the country, so her annual salary must have been at least \$900 grand...

"Ah, actually, I moved house recently, and I spent a bit of money buying an equipment, so..."

"I, it's totally fine! My grandfather owns this restaurant, so it's all free."

Yu Sae-Jung proudly pounded her chest as she spoke, and that made Kim Yu-Rin smile brightly as well.

And then, the three of them conversed in a slightly awkward atmosphere until their food arrived.

The topics of the conversation were varied. The Goblin Alchemist, the Orc Blacksmith, the large scale incidents in China and the USA involving the continuous Fissure eruptions, the future and what it had in store for them; and finally...

"Ah, right. Will the two monsters really join your Society, The Monster?"

"...Two monsters?"

"Yes. Nowadays people are calling the two by that term. Well, I believe it's actually a term of reverence as both of them demonstrated absolutely overwhelming skills in their chosen fields."

After hearing her serious voice, anyone could tell that this was the topic she wanted to discuss from the very beginning.

"Well, really... I'm not too sure. The Goblin did say he was on

friendly terms with the Orc..."

Sae-Jin vaguely answered and quickly assumed a smile as he tried to speak in a sly, somewhat shameless tone.

"You seem to have a lot of interest in this matter, though? If that's so, would you like to join our Society as well? Then, it should be more than possible to bridge the two connections..."

"Wah, that is an excellent idea!!!"

Suddenly, Yu Sae-Jung shouted out at the top of her lungs.

...And it was way too d**n loud. Loud enough to pull all the attention of the surroundings to here.

'What's the heck is she doing?!'

He became embarrassed slightly and glared at Yu Sae-Jung.

Indeed, her current state was a mess. Her face was completely flustered, there were numerous large sweat drops dotting her forehead, and her entire demeanor seemed like as if she'd faint at any given moment.

Sighing out grandly, Sae-Jin fished out a handkerchief and dabbed all the sweat off her forehead.

"...Ah, oh, thanks..."

Finally calming down, she took several deep breaths and thanked him.

Kim Yu-Rin blankly watched this scene with an unreadable expression before opening her mouth once more.

"That... I'm grateful for the invitation. To be offered an opportunity to join the hottest Society right now... But my situation is a little bit complicated at the moment. However, I'll definitely think about it."

Yu-Rin really wanted to join, of course – but she couldn't as she was now. As a matter of principle, an Order Master of a

government-run Knights Order could not join any Societies. And she was a person who'd be following in her father's footsteps and become the next Master.

There might be three years left until that, but still, she figured it would instead only inconvenience the Society's members if she joined for that limited amount of time.

"I understand. Please, give it a careful consi..."

It was then.

SFX for things vibrating

Out of the blue, the floor vibrated.

"...What the?"

Sae-Jin was wondering if there was an earthquake, but soon, he could see that was not the case from the view through windows of the restaurant.

He could view down to the Han River from this restaurant and he saw it – a huge shape rising slowly from the middle of the river's surface.

"…!!!!"

With a deeply astonished expression, Kim Yu-Rin shot up from her seat.

It was a Leviathan.

A gigantic sea Monster that made the Han River seem cramped; its body like that of a snake and possessing a head similar to that of a dragon, it was sometimes referred to as the 'Imugi of Oceans' – and more importantly, it was a Monster that should not have existed in this river.

< 12. A Development that's not a progress. (1) > Fin.

(TL: an Imugi is, according to the ever-reliable Wikipedia, a proto-dragon found in Korean folklore. It resembles a giant snake,

and after surviving a thousand years it can become a full-fledged dragon. There are various versions of folk tales, all describing different ways for the creature to become a true dragon.)

Chapter 41: A Development That's Not a Progress (2)

" !!!!"

With a deeply astonished expression, Kim Yu-Rin shot up from her seat.

It was a Leviathan.

A gigantic sea Monster that made the Han River seem cramped; its body like that of a snake and possessing a head similar to that of a dragon, it was sometimes referred to as the 'Imugi of Oceans' – and more importantly, it was a Monster that should not have existed in this river.

As implied, it was an oceanic Monster – not only that, a Monster dwelling in the deep seas.

There could only be two reasons why such a Monster made an appearance here.

'It's either a summon or there's a Fissure nearby.'

However, with the latter option, there would be a lot of accompanying Monsters, so it seemed the former was the most likely scenario here.

Regrettably, though – there was no time to debate on things like possibilities and what nots right now.....!!

"I apologise, but I must go ahead. I'll compensate for it later!!"

Kim Yu-Rin wrapped her body in Mana and dashed like a beam of light towards the window.

SFX for glass shattering

Leaving the broken glass pieces behind, she rolled her body in the air and descended towards the Han River below.

The magical beast of the deep seas, a Leviathan.

As all the countless tales and folklores have told, a Leviathan was a Monster possessing incalculable strength. So much so, instead of calling it a Monster, it'd be far more correct to label it as a natural disaster.

However, that only applied when the creature was out at sea. Right now, it was confined to a river with limited amount of room for movement.

Kim Yu-Rin, with her sword drawn, headed towards the Leviathan that was raising its head out of the water.

However, her aim wasn't to kill the creature. No, it was about cancelling the summon. She had to destroy either the summoning magic circle engraved somewhere, or the summoning talisman.

But before all that, though – the priority laid with minimising the confusion and harm to the city itself. That's why she set the purpose of her first attack to 'Leviathan, faint for five minutes'.

This was only possible due to one of the special powers from the very unique Trait she possessed, also known as The Desideratum. Within the allowance of her Mana's capacity, Kim Yu-Rin could imbue her sword strikes with special conditions. And that condition would, even if it's only for a moment, become the reality that had to be carried out no matter what.

'My Mana...'

She bit down on her teeth at the sensation of energy deserting her body. She wasn't even aiming to kill the dang creature, nor to knock it out for an hour – it was just for a measly five minutes. Yet, the Mana expenditure proved to be incredibly severe.

"——!!"

With its head already breaking out of the water's surface, the Leviathan let out a huge wail that sounded like a ship's horn. Thankfully, that unbearable low frequency noise didn't continue for long.

Khwaaaaang!!

An explosion shook the surroundings.

Her entire body covered in blue Mana, Kim Yu-Rin's sword strike descended from the sky and properly struck the middle of the creature's forehead.

The Leviathan that was already quite irritated from the sudden summoning, crumbled back down to the water's surface with whites showing on its eyes.

Splaaaash!!

And as that giant body fell violently, water spray as vicious as a hailstorm spread out to everywhere.

"...Euk."

Kim Yu-Rin landed gently on the walkways on the side of the river, but stumbled a little before finally kneeling down on one knee. She was experiencing a bout of dizziness thanks to the depletion of Mana.

She still had around half of her total strength left, but it was her first time spending that much Mana in a single strike ever since her rookie days; back when she still hadn't got the proper control of her own Trait down yet.

But there was no time to rest. She quickly wielded an artifact made out of a crystal, and right away, the voice belonging to a Knight in the Raven Order hurriedly leaked out from it.

"There is a Leviath... What did you say?!"

However, it wasn't because they had already found out about the Leviathan situation in the Han River.

- Miss!! There are chaos developing in the areas of Nam Mountain in Seoul, the Monster field in Gangwon Province, as well as in the city of Busan!! The situation in Busan is the most critical, as a Fissure is about to erupt there as we speak!!

So many incidents, all of them breaking out simultaneously.

"Miss Yu-Rin!!"

This was an unprecedented situation in her career as a Knight. And as she stood there, maintaining as much composure as possible while trying to come up with a countermeasure, there was a voice calling out to her.

It was Yu Sae-Jung and Kim Yu-Rin.

"Do not come here! It's dangerous!!"

Yu-Rin shouted out, but they showed no concern and came towards her.

"Are you alright? And what the heck is that thing?"

Kim Sae-Jin asked as he helped Kim Yu-Rin to stand up with the aid of Yu Sae-Jung. Yu-Rin replied in a complicated expression.

"...It's a Leviathan."

"...Huh?"

At the words containing a mixture of emotions, Yu Sae-Jung became speechless for the moment.

A Leviathan. That mythical Monster shouldn't even be here...

"But fortunately for us, it's only a summon. I just need to find the summoning medium which I'm sure is nearby. However, chaos is breaking out not only here and because of that, the available manpower is.... Can you guys lend me your help?"

A temporarily summoned Monster would be sent back to where it came from if the creature's powers were exhausted to a certain degree, or when the summoning medium disappeared, or when the summoning time expired. So, if the summoning medium were to be destroyed, then this disaster would easily be put under control.

And it was not too difficult to figure out where the medium could

potentially be hiding; at the bottom of the river, of course.

The real issue was the time. With only five minutes, or ten with one more attack from Kim Yu-Rin, it was just not enough to scour the entire riverbed. But waiting for the summoning time to expire would cause too much harm to the city.

"We will help!!"

Yu Sae-Jung and Kim Sae-Jung replied in sync.

Yu-Rin gave them some simple instructions and then dived into the river. Yu Sae-Jung too, followed her right after.

However, only Sae-Jin took a step back.

He had no idea what this medium thing might be, but he figured that there would be some form of aura coming off of it.

As Sae-Jin took in the panoramic view of the river from a distance, his eyes changed to a golden colour.

The world brightened, and everything became much clearer. From the Leviathan, a green aura signifying the fainted state rose up. But seeing that the richness of the colour was becoming less vibrant, there didn't seem to be much time left.

He hurriedly searched the surface of the river for any signs of nearly imperceptible aura.

He couldn't see anything on the surface.

That only left the possibility of the underwater.

He continuously lowered the level of his gaze until he finally found it.

On the opposite side to where he was, a thick, wavering bluish aura – a fair distance away from him.

'That's it-!'

He ran towards the spot without a moment's delay, and then, jumped into the river.

As expected, the Whirlwind Dash was an incredibly useful skill that could be activated even while in water. He created powerful waves as he swam forward.

He needed three minutes to get to the spot where he detected the aura. As soon as arriving here, he quickly dived underwater.

The Wolf's eyesight was incomparably bright even while below the water's surface. Sae-Jin could see without trouble, the mysterious magic circle drawn on the bottom of the river, and a strange scale rooted in the middle of it.

He swam down and downwards, and when he got to the bottom, he first activated the Wolf's Claws. Since the magic circle was drawn with Mana, he thought that in order to destroy it he had to slice it up real good.

But before Sae-Jin could swing the extended nails...

The river water violently churned and vibrated.

Wooooooung-

The Leviathan was waking up. That horrid wail mimicking the ship's horn resounded again.

However, that wail was cut short with a Ppuck, a sound of powerful impact, and soon after, another set of rough waves travelled across the river's surface.

"...What the hell was that all about?"

Sae-Jin was slightly surprised by this sudden and strange development, but returned his focus back on the magic circle. Because he was under water, his movement was rather slow.

SFX for swinging one's arms around underwater

Sae-Jin swung his nails around several times, but there was no change.

'My Skill Level is too low to do this in the human's appearance.'

Reluctantly, he transformed both of his arms into that of the Wolf beast's. Almost instantly, his arms grew bigger and black fur sprouted out.

The Wolf's brutal attacks were vicious enough to cut through water.

"—!!"

He swung the claws as hard as he could.

And like that, the water was really cut apart.

In that brief instance, the water in contact with his claws evaporated.

'Wow.'

But again, there wasn't enough time to blankly admire the power of his claws. He swung his claws towards the magic circle like a madman.

Every time he swung the claws, the aura became weaker until eventually, it disappeared completely without a trace. When he took a glance at the bottom, even the magic circle had disintegrated.

And at the same time, the gigantic Monster threatening to cause an untold amount of damage had also vanished. Sae-Jin reverted back to his human appearance and tried to get back to the surface.

However.... that small scale at the centre of the magic circle entered his eyes. A sort of curiosity took hold over him. So, he reached out, grabbed it and swam back up to the surface.

"Phwoar!"

As he broke the surface of the water after completing his mission, the chaotic scene on the river banks assaulted his eyes and ears.

The sounds of sirens pierced the heavens; the soldiers in their green camo gear and their tanks were positioned above the bridges; and there were numerous Knights clad in Mana getting ready to jump into the battle littering the riverside.

Even though their attire and their roles were different, their reactions were remarkably similar to one another. All of them were in the middle of absent-mindedly searching the surroundings. That was because the cause of this emergency situation, the Leviathan, had just vanished into the thin air.

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"Fuu..."
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Sae-Jin watched them for a bit, before heading towards the shore.

But something else caught his attention again. This time, though, it wasn't some random stuff.

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"Miss Yu-Rin!!"
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It was Kim Yu-Rin, who was wearily swimming near the spot where the Leviathan used to be.

He swam out towards her position. His speed was really fast so it didn't take him long to get to where she was.

```
"Are you alright?"
```

" "

Even though she nodded yes without saying a word, her pale face was saying otherwise.

"Hold on tight."

At his prompt, she grabbed his clothes tightly and asked.

```
"...Mister, Sae-Jin, Did you, do it?"
```

"Eh?"

"The... summon... cancel..."

"Ah, that. Yes. I got lucky and found the magic circle."

Kim Yu-Rin couldn't say anything anymore; she simply leaned her head against his chest and closed her eyes. It seemed that the price she paid to knock out the giant Leviathan twice was not a joke.

It was quite an obvious thing, if one thought about it.

The Leviathan was the king of the oceans, the legendary creature that even something like a Kraken would avoid getting into a tussle within the confines of the sea. She knocked out such a legendary magical beast not once, but twice – so, it'd be even more weird if she was perfectly normal afterwards.

"Hurry!!"

Stepping back on the solid ground, Sae-Jin handed Yu-Rin over to the rescue party. The emergency personnel quickly surrounded her and took her to a waiting ambulance.

"Miss Knight!! Are you okay?"

"Her pulse is normal!"

And just like that, all attention was focused on Kim Yu-Rin only, and he became completely forgotten all of a sudden. Sae-Jin carefully surveyed his surroundings for a bit, before taking a closer look at the thing clenched securely within his grasp.

A single, brilliantly shining scale.

So glossy and soft, yet stronger than any metal known to man, thus no blade could even think about leaving a blemish on it.

Without a doubt, it was a scale from the Leviathan. And the main reason why the magic beast of the oceans could be brought here with nothing but a summoning magic.

""

He then promptly swallowed it. He didn't even know why he did that. Just that, his instincts made him do it.

And right in that moment, a strange change occurred inside his body.

< 12. A Development that's not a progress (2) > Fin.

Chapter 42: A Development That's Not a Progress (3)

[Condition complete: ???]

- When one more condition is fulfilled, the Wolf Form will evolve into 'Lycanthrope'. (2/3)
- After ingesting a 'divine' material, an unknown ability has been unlocked.
 - A new Monster Form, 'Feeble Sea Monster' is now available.
- The host can now move and breathe under water as if he's on land.
- A Passive Skill, 'Ruler of the Water' (Level F-) has been acquired.
- A Passive Skill, 'Leviathan's Scales' (Level F-) has been acquired.

It felt like his innards were boiling. He didn't even have enough leeway to read all the rising alert windows. He could only think about returning home right now.

Somehow, he had enough power of reasoning left to ask a favour from Yu Sae-Jung. She panicked somewhat and called for a car when he told her that he needed to get home right away.

He couldn't remember what else transpired after climbing into the car.

As he tried very hard to control his burning insides and the unstable consciousness, he found himself back inside his house already, having changed into the Wolf Form after exhausting the time limit for being human, which happened while he was blacking out intermittently.

He breathed out a sigh of relief and made a solemn promise to

himself never to eat anything that looked even a wee bit suspicious from now on.

*

" "

Kim Yu-Rin opened her eyes. The first thing she saw was an unfamiliar white ceiling.

'I must have fainted.'

It was an obvious result since she had used up the very last scrap of Mana inside her.

She relaxed her aching body with a gentle stretching of her muscles and slowly raised her upper body. There didn't seem like anything was amiss, only that her back felt a little stiff.

"So..."

Where am I? She looked around the room and tilted her head.

To call this place a hospital... her room was just too big and luxurious for that. But it did seem like a hospital, as there was a needle in her arm connected to an IV drip, as well as the strong stench of medicines wafting in the air. Well, the definite proof was the patient gown she had on at the moment.

Kim Yu-Rin stood up from the bed and slowly walked towards the door to the side.

When she grabbed the doorknob and pushed it, the door opened incredibly smoothly.

...And there was yet another room.

"Ah, you've woken up!"

A young girl lying on a comfy couch in this living room (?) quickly bolted up. It was Yu Sae-Jung.

"Uh... Miss Sae-Jung? Where am I? How did I end up here?"

"This is a hospital. The Dawn Hospital's VVIP room, to be exact.

That's that, but is your body alright?"

"Oh, I'm feeli..."

"Please, feel free to talk to me without honorifics!!" (TL: yes, Kim Yu-Rin has been using honorifics when talking to either Yu Sae-Jung or to our MC.)

Yu Sae-Jung's eyes were sparkling brightly. As that appearance was adorable like that of a puppy, Kim Yu-Rin ended up giggling as well.

"If you're okay with it, then... I understand. I'm feeling fine. By the way, what happened to other situations?"

As expected of her, what she wanted to know the most was the current status of the situations – the news regarding the Monsters rampaging around in the Nam Mountain in Seoul, in the city of Busan as well as in the Monster field of Gangwon Province.

"Thanks to the timely mobilisation and perfect prior preparations, they have all been suppressed successfully. And because of your intervention, we were able to prevent the Leviathan from causing lots of harm, too."

"...Mm?"

Yu-Rin tilted her head. Indeed, she was responsible for knocking out the Leviathan, but the real decisive contributor to ending the threat early was the Hunter Kim Sae-Jin. But, why hasn't this girl mentioned his name, too...?

"What do you mean by that? And also, where's Mister Sae-Jin right now?"

"Sae-Jin Oppa went home as soon as the incident ended, saying there was something he needed to attend to urgently. But... what's wrong?"

When Yu Sae-Jung asked with a delicate gaze, Yu-Rin scratched the back of her neck while replying to her.

"Well, that... Actually, Mister Sae-Jin played the biggest role... Wait, are the media also saying I did it alone?"

"...Eh? Sae-Jin Oppa did what?"

Behind the surprised Sae-Jung, a news broadcast from the TV could be heard.

- The Knight responsible for ending the Leviathan incident has now been identified as the 41st Highest Tier Knight in Korea, Miss Kim Yu-Rin. Knight Kim Yu-Rin continuously demonstrated her overwhelming martial skills to beat down and knock out the Leviathan twice before the creature could start causing harm to the city...

"...Huh-woo."

Yu-Rin let out an odd sigh.

Being omitted from the results of a battle – it was one of the mistakes she intensely disliked while serving as the country's Highest Tier Knight. If one looked at it in a different way, then it was also akin to stealing one's achievements from the battle, which was an act she abhorred with passion.

"...We need to correct this. A press conference sh..."

"You want to hold a press conference?"

Yu-Rin nodded her head.

"It's because the Hunter Kim Sae-Jin's role was crucial, you see. It was him who cancelled the summoning, after all."

Yu Sae-Jung's eyes went totally round at the revelation of something she had no idea of. Then, as if she remembered something in this instance, she quickly spoke out.

"Ah, I think there is.... no need to do a press conference, actually."

"...Mm? Why not?"

When Yu-Rin showed a puzzled expression, the smiling Yu Sae-Jung took a couple of steps to reach and grab the curtains covering the windows.

"Well, we've got a plenty of reporters camping outside."

SFX for opening a curtain

Then, she pulled the curtains wide open.

Almost at the same time, countless small explosions of lights went off, as if to embroider the night sky. They were from the flashing cameras of the reporters who seemed to supernaturally realise that the curtains were about to be pulled.

""

Yu-Rin dumbfoundedly stared at those fireworks of lights.

*

– It was the Hunter Kim Sae-Jin who braved the dangers to dive deep beneath the river to erase the summoning magic circle of the Leviathan. I was only there to provide support...

While watching Kim Yu-Rin's interview on TV, Sae-Jin was talking to someone on his mobile phone.

- "I'm truly sorry. I also didn't expect things to devolve this way... Oh, did you have to buy a new phone?"

"Yes. But it's quite alright. I was planning to buy a new one anyway."

The person on the other side of the line was the one doing the interview, Kim Yu-Rin. After finding out about Sae-Jin's condition, she procured his numbers for the new mobile phone from Yu Sae-Jung and gave him a call.

"And that.... well, it's not something to feel bad about, I guess. Actually, it worked out better for me."

The impact from Kim Yu-Rin's interview was huge.

He had become the no.1 real-time search topic, and requests for interviews flooded in; and the officials from the city of Seoul asked him if he could make some time to come and receive an award of commendation.

Also, several Knights Orders called him. They were not the famed Orders ranked 5~6th position or higher, but almost all the Orders below them did contact him. They all asked him if he ever thought about becoming a Knight, instead.

Kim Sae-Jin refused them all and bought another phone.

This phone was registered under his own name. The previous one was actually registered under Hazeline's name, as that device was kind of like a gift she gave to him.

- "Is that so? But, still..."

Kim Yu-Rin blurred the end of her sentence, her tone still apologetic.

"No, I'm really alright. But if you insist... well, you can buy me another meal later on, then."

- "...Will that be really alright with you?"
- "Of course."
- "Well... then, in Seoul..."
- "No, for me, Seoul is a bit..."
- "Oh, is that so? Then, I'll go to Gangwon Province next week."

Sae-Jin ended the call with Kim Yu-Rin here and got up from the couch.

Today, there was still one more thing left to do.

It was a decision he had arrived at after a lengthy deliberation.

*

He went to the Yoseon Alchemy House.

"The building in front of ours?"

"Yes."

Outwardly, the purpose of his visit was to rent the building in front of the Alchemy House.

Hazeline had even resorted to getting a loan in order to buy buildings in front and next to her Alchemy House; and now, Sae-Jin was requesting to rent the one in front.

"Uh...... But why? I'd like to listen to the reason first."

She originally planned to set up a special exhibit for the Goblin Alchemist in the front building, so she was asking him in a slightly reluctant tone.

"That... I was thinking of opening up an armoury."

Sae-Jin was getting tensed up for some reason.

Sure enough, Sae-Jin was planning to confess the truth of him being the Orc Blacksmith to Hazeline here today.

"Aha! So, it's for your friend the Blacksmith, right? Then, of course, I welcome it!!"

"A frie... eh? What do you mean?"

When Hazeline reacted positively while clapping her hands, Sae-Jin's expression became momentarily dumbfounded.

"Ah... I've got pretty keen senses, you know. I thought that voice in the Grand Finale of the Blacksmiths Tournament sounded really similar to your own voice, but since there are people with similar type of voices, I didn't think much of it, until..."

"Until?"

"Some weird people started showing here – those morons... ahem, I mean, slightly lacking individuals. Saying stuff like the Orc Blacksmith was a woman and such..."

At her words, Sae-Jin scratched the back of his neck.

It was a blunder on his part. It couldn't be helped since he had to somehow communicate with the judges in the Blacksmiths Tournament, but it was him who trusted wholesale the words of the TV station people when they said they would keep the secret...

"That's when it clicked for me. Your friend is the Orc Blacksmith, and you acted as the Orc for your friend who, for personal reasons, could not appear in public."

Speaking up to here, Hazeline let out a triumphant snort.

However, she was utterly mistaken.

And he had to correct her right this instant.

Even if it was just one person, he wanted to tell the truth about him to someone he could trust. He just could not live while hiding his f*cking situation forever, nor did he plan on doing that.

"...Miss Hazeline. What I'm... about to tell you, until I'm ready, you must keep it as a secret between us."

Out of all the connections he had built up with his two hands like building a sand castle, didn't the one with Hazeline run the deepest?

Although it had only been half a year, Sae-Jin hadn't known anyone for a longer period of time than he did with Hazeline and also, even if it was actually just her investing for the future, she still lent him a large sum of money without hesitation.

Even if this trust was only a one-way street and she only thought of him as a product...

The current him needed Hazeline's connections, her talents, and most importantly, her friendship where he would be able to discuss things without reservations.

"Yes?"

Hazeline's eyes went round, her head tilting slightly at the sudden seriousness of Sae-Jin's atmosphere.

Sae-Jin breathed in deeply, before continuing on.

And on that day, Sae-Jin was able to clearly witness with his own two eyes, what would happen when a talented Dark Elf Wizard was utterly shocked to the ends of this universe and beyond.

Really, seriously, he got to experience the phenomenon of the 'Poltergeist'.

*

Hazeline delayed the Alchemy House's extension plan for now, and converted the top floor of the building in front to the Orc's armoury. She figured that even without advertisement, potential punters would queue up and so, instead of opening the armoury on the ground floor and having a swarm of riff-raff there, it'd be a lot smarter for marketing purposes to operate on the 'customers reserve their products' basis.

"...Nice."

On one of the walls of this yet-to-be decorated interior, Sae-Jin hung the golden plaque that read: 'The ORK Blacksmith, affiliated with the The Monster'. For now, it was gold-plated, but soon, it'd be in real gold...

"Are you almost done?"

As he stood there thinking, Hazeline approached and asked him.

"Yes. All that's left to do, is to find someone to work here..."

"You don't have to worry about that one. I've already got a Dark Elf with heavy lips ready in the wings. Before that, though, have you received orders already?"

"Of course. I've received word from the Dawn Knights Order that, as long as the product is better than a Mid Quality, then they'd pay a minimum of \$2.7 million US. I hear that, since there are a lot of people trying to place orders, they are handing out numbered tickets as well."

< 12. A Development that's not a progress (3) > Fin.

Chapter 43: A Small Footstep (1)

"...Oh, my gosh."

Currently in The Orc's Forge. Even though it was named as a 'smithy', it was no different than an armoury. It was decided that the ground floor of the building with the shop located on the top floor would be converted into a cafe.

It was suspected that the customers for either the Alchemy House or the armoury that were waiting around with nothing better to do, might utilise the cafe's facilities.

Hazeline's ideas were right on the money.

Right now, the time was noon, when the Knights would be beyond busy in the middle of hunting Monsters. However, there was a huge crowd of Knights populating the cafe at this very moment.

Although there weren't any instantly-recognisable Knights ranked upper Mid Tier or higher present, too many of the people here were who you'd call the true combat forces for the Orders – such as low Mid Tier and Mid Tier Knights. At a rough head count, there seemed to be well over 80 here.

Indeed, it was still in the early days, but Hazeline had a feeling that this business will become more successful than the initial estimates. She closed her eyes and tuned her ears to the surrounding conversations for a minute or two.

"Wow... lots of Knights are here. And check their emblems out. Oh, are they from the Raven?"

Every Knights Order had an unique emblem emblazoned with the symbol of each organization. These emblems served as an identification to show which Knight belonged to which Order.

"You're right. The competition is fiercer than I thought. Hey man, I couldn't have imagined that I needed to go through an interview first before I'm allowed to buy a weapon, you know?"

A female Knight uttered out a complaint that didn't sound like a complaint while sipping on her coffee.

"But isn't it fine? I mean, I can get a day off from work by saying, 'if I want to become an owner of the Orc's weapon, I need to do an interview'."

"Fu-hut. You're right. I also didn't imagine I'd get the afternoon off, just like that."

"Right. By the way, uh... of course this Blacksmith is pretty darn skilled, but this does mean that our weapons are also pretty rubbish, no?"

They were both waiting for the interview on the top floor, the Orc's Blacksmith.

It was a bit odd to do an interview first if one wanted to buy a product, but it couldn't be helped. The demand far outstripped the supply, after all. So the employees had to persuade the Knights by saying 'Think of it as an interview to become the owner of the weapon'.

That's how much fame the Orc Blacksmith had gained among the Knights thanks to the recent blacksmithing tournament. They believed that, right now he might be a rookie that had appeared like a meteor, but in the future, he'd surely become the biggest star that would brighten up the heavens.

"Mid Tier Knight, Mister Joo Ji-Hyuk?"

An employee emerged from the cafe's back door and called out a Knight's name.

"Yes, that's me!"

A male Knight promptly stood up and shouted out loudly. His emblem showed that he was from the Dawn Knights Order.

"It's your turn now, sir."

"Yes!"

The guy named Joo Ji-Hyuk followed the female employee.

Wuoooong-

The posture of Joo Ji-Hyuk riding on the elevator looked rather uncomfortable.

Even though he sensed nothing special or anything like that in the elevator, the slight vibration he felt made it seem high-rent to him. His heart was palpitating greatly as well.

To a Knight, a weapon was similar to a lover he or she could spend the rest of their lives together. It was difficult finding a weapon that matched perfectly to the user to the point of wanting to use it for the rest of one's life. And if found, securing it also required a lot of sacrifices. That was why it was normal for him to be quite tense like this...

Thinking this way, Joo Ji-Hyuk worked hard to pull himself together.

Tting-

Before he knew it, the elevator arrived on the top floor and opened its doors.

""

Gulp.

He reflexively swallowed his saliva. It was after seeing the interior. There wasn't anything eye catching here. Instead, only the chilly and grey wallpapers were plastered all over the place. However, they imparted a strange feeling of intense pressure on him, making his shoulders shrivel a little.

The Knight, totally unaware that Kim Sae-Jin had imbued a special attribute to these wallpapers, couldn't help but admire the scale of difference the Orc Blacksmith seemed to have and started to move his legs.

And Joo Ji-Hyuk, while looking around, found a certain plaque. And his eyes nearly popped out from their sockets with surprise.

The gleaming golden letters carved on the plaque said...

'The Orc's Forge, affiliated with the Society, The Monster.'

"Please follow me."

Joo Ji-Hyuk woke up from the stupefied state with his mouth agape while staring at the plaque, when the female employee spoke to him.

"Ah... yes!"

He followed the employee and soon, before realising it, he was in front of the door to the 'Manager's office'. No doubt, the famous Blacksmith would be waiting for him there...

"Please note, the interview will be conducted not by the Blacksmith, but the chairperson of the Society."

"...Oh. Of course..."

The chairperson of the Society would mean the Mid Tier Hunter, Kim Sae-Jin. Even though he was merely a Hunter, Joo Ji-Hyuk heard that this man was nowadays becoming someone who shouldn't be ignored. That guy couldn't be underestimated at all.

"Please, you can enter right ahead."

Joo Ji-Hyuk nodded his head, and grasped the doorknob to the Manager's office.

*

"If I am to become the new owner of a weapon crafted by Sir Orc the Blacksmith, I am deeply confident of treating it better than anyone. I will perform careful maintenance at least three times a day..."

The Dawn Knights Order affiliated Knight, Joo Ji-Hyuk, sounded like as if he was doing an interview with his life on the line. His

face was terribly tense, his posture very upright, as he looked at the person in front.

"...Is that right? Well then... can you please tell me the type of weapon you mainly use?"

In here, the Manager's office, an unexpected interview was happening right now.

The interviewer was, of course, Kim Sae-Jin – and the interviewees that had already passed through prior were many Mid to low Mid Tier Knights.

Those supposedly-busy upper Mid Tier Knights with some social status and a face to keep, only sent in a single request form per person, but ones with sincere needs ended up sending a multiple – but the Knights with lower ranks actually came to visit the armoury personally.

"Well... I mainly use dual-handed swords, among them the 'Zweihänder'. I don't know if it's difficult to craft this type of a weapon, or the skills of the weaponsmiths who made it for me are lacking... but, most of the time, after I go on a hunt five times, or participate once in the Fissure Exploration, the swords end up breaking."

Those were to the words that clearly demonstrated the reality of the current weapon drought.

When a person possessed some modicum of ability, he or she would rather choose a profession – such as Knights or Wizards – that were cool looking and made lots of money, rather than bravely venture down the perilous path of blacksmithing.

Even then, Knights treated blacksmiths with disdain up until around five years ago, which made several existing smiths to quit the trade altogether. Though, they have begun showing some humility nowadays after realising the urgency of the current situation. "There was this one time, when the sword broke in the middle of the Fissure Exploration and caused me a great deal of trouble."

"Oh, is that so? By the way, if it's a Zweihänder, it might cost a lot of money."

A Zweihänder was a great sword wielded by both hands, featuring a vicious outer appearance. If this guy was selected as the new owner for the weapon, then it would surely be a tough challenge for Sae-Jin who had just about enough amount of Mana for the job.

"Ah, no, it's fine! I was aware of the cost when I chose it. I don't mean to brag, but our Knights Order has a lending system which happens to be well organised and quite reasonable, so.... Hahaha!"

Even the laughter coming from this young man, who resembled a simple and honest youth from a rural farmstead, sounded sincere and pure.

Sae-Jin chuckled lightly as well, and told the Knight that he understood so he should return and wait for a good news.

"Oh, and please, don't lose heart... even if you fail the evaluation. As you may have guessed already, there have been just too many Knights requesting for weapons, so it's simply impossible to satisfy them all..."

"I understand! Since I'm looking for a weapon to use for the rest of my life, of course I should try again even if I don't make it the first time."

As a Mid Tier ranked Knight, he would have achieved so much and kicked many a*ses, but this guy remained humble right until the end as he made his exit.

And as the one Knight left, without the time for a break, the female employee came in to the office and confirmed the next reservation.

Sae-Jin did a quick check on the amount of time he could spend

as a human.

Around two hours. Figuring that he could do another 20 interviews or so, he told her to let the next person in.

Even though he was busy, strangely enough he felt rather great at the moment.

*

Currently, a new rumour was spreading around in various Knights Orders. It was about the Orc Blacksmith joining the Society, The Monster.

Although the name of the Orc Blacksmith had not been added to the member's list for the Society yet, the rumour began from those utterly-shocked Knights who had personally went and visited the Orc's Forge and saw the plaque there – and started telling other Knights about it.

"But it's a relief, isn't it? Since our Miss Kim Yu-Rin has a connection with that Society's chairperson."

"...Uh?"

Currently, they were in the conference room of the Raven Knights Order's Team 1, which Kim Yu-Rin was a key member of – and it was a rest period after a hour-long intense meeting had taken place.

Knights were yapping on about this and that to relieve the stress when, out of the blue, the arrows of attention were directed towards Kim Yu-Rin's way.

"You're so right. We have that, right? What a relief – the heads of other Orders are supposedly agonising over on how to make a nice and smooth contact, or so I hear. Oh, right, Miss Yu-Rin? My weapon is a bit..."

A female Knight, while making an intentionally pitiful expression, unsheathed a longsword with nicks here and there on

the blade.

...

She sheathed back her weapon after Kim Yu-Rin stared at her with an expression of disbelief, but her expectations still burned true.

"...I'm going to have dinner with the person later, so I'll ask, okay?"

```
"Wah, really?"
"Oi!" (Kim Soo-Gyeom)
"..."
```

While other Knights were chatting away in a lively fashion, Kim Soo-Gyeom was the sole exception. His expression remained sour as if there was something he wasn't satisfied about.

"...Fhup. Miss Yu-Rin, I think this guy is jealous that you're going out on a dinner with another man. How dare a greenhorn Mid Tier, and a wet-behind-the-ears brat like you eye up our Highest Tier Knight...?"

"No, no, that's not true!!"

The female Knight spoke teasingly after accurately deciphering his mood; Kim Soo-Gyeom then denied everything by waving both of his hands this and that, all the while his face was dyed totally in red.

"...That's enough with the teasing. Any more of that, and Soo-Gyeom's face might just burst wide open, you know. Plus, don't just rely on me and you guys go there first yourselves. It's not like a weapon can be made overnight or something..."

"Eiii... How can I go and visit a rookie Blacksmith when my rank is upper Mid Tier? Of course, if he can make me a High Quality product that will withstand my Mana output, then sure, I'd go there and get down on my knees – but, it's not just related to me, the pride of the entire Raven Knights Order is at stake here."

The female Knight briefly stopped talking and narrowed her brows. It seemed she was irritated by just thinking about the matter.

"It can't be done, unless it's like Miss Yu-Rin meeting up socially with the boss of the smithy or whatever – I mean, if somehow the story gets leaked out onto SNS, then the a*sholes at Dawn and Goryeo might start disparaging us. Like, 'the upper Mid Tier Knight Yi Hye-Rin, running out to meet the debutant blacksmith on her bare feet cuz her weapon's rubbish' or stuff like that."

"You.... Fu-woo."

That's the kind of attitude that made blacksmiths' numbers to decline in the first place...

Kim Yu-Rin didn't spit above words out.

It was because what the female Knight said was not entirely inaccurate either. Indeed, it was becoming a common occurrence for the members of Dawn that were enjoying ascendancy to openly pick fights with them.

A Knight from the Dawn Order who was famous in the entertainment industry caused a hot controversy by provoking the Raven with a selfie taken in the interior of the Dawn Order's building and uploading the image with the hashtag #BestKnightsOrderInKorea.

And although there wasn't any physical proof, it was almost a sure thing that there were part-timers busy posting comments on various SNS and portal sites.

In this environment, the chances of a toxic rumour spreading around were high, if a upper Mid Tier Knight was seen visiting an armoury of a blacksmith who had made his debut less than half a year ago.

Even though there was only a difference of one word, the power

and position of an upper Mid Tier was far greater than a Mid Tier. If Mid Tiers were seen as the regular combat force, then one could say that the upper Mid Tiers were the true core of that force.

Of course, there had been cases of such a Knight seeking out blacksmiths in the past. But those were when the blacksmiths in question were either artisans or masters, and when the Knights were going there to receive the completed weapons.

No matter how famous the Orc Blacksmith had become, he was not an artisan but a newbie. And the real reason why there was so much attention being paid to him was because of his uncertain pledge that he would craft a minimum of two weapons every month.

So, the worries of the Knight Yi Hye-Rin was not unreasonable.

In a way, this was a battle of pride – standing proud until the folks at the Dawn ranked upper Mid Tier started visiting the blacksmith first.

Obviously it was all a useless thing, but that was how the Knights rolled.

"Whatever the case, don't expect too much. I also can't ask for a lot, you know."

"Of course~"

"Well then, let's recommence the meeting."

"Ah-aht!! It's been only ten minutes, though?!"

"You're being noisy."

*

The passive skill, 'Ruler of the Water', proved to be really useful.

"Oooooh, it really became warm."

The only fault with it was that he was using it on practical stuff only.

Sae-Jin touched the surface of the water filled up in the bathtub and changed its temperature, so it was just about the perfect warmth for his body.

This was one of the abilities of the level F-passive skill 'Ruler of the Water', the 'depending on the level, the host can manipulate water at will'.

The water's temperature changed in an instant, of course.

For now, all he could do with it was to boil a kettle for a cup of coffee, cook a ramen or like now, get ready to take a bath, but... he had a feeling that as long as the skill level was high enough, there would be lots of ways to utilise this skill.

"Oww yeah~"

He slowly lowered himself in the bathtub with a satisfied expression. Then he thought about the 'Feeble Sea Monster' Form.

"...Should I change into it now?"

It was nice and all that his Monster Form had increased by one, but since it didn't sound cool, he had been delaying checking it out until now. But today, he was feeling good so, might as well.

"...Hm."

Finally deciding on it, he changed into the Sea Monster Form.

No special fireworks or light show went off. Only that, his height decreased suddenly, and scales grew out on his skin like fur.

""

Having changed into the so-called the Feeble Sea Monster, Sae-Jin dumbfoundedly stared at the ceiling-mounted mirror.

"...What the?! Is this even a Monster?!"

To call it a Monster.... it was just too d**n cute for that.

Within those pair of excessively large and round eyes were lots of moisture, and all over his body there were white and soft scales covering him. Thanks to that, his white-as-a-snowman body looked uselessly dainty and cute.

In other words.... he looked entirely like a baby harp seal except, with a horn on his head.

An adorable animal that could rouse a person's protective instincts just by its appearance alone.

No matter what, this was not a Monster.

...

Subconsciously, Sae-Jin rubbed his own cheek.

His cheeks, full and round and stuff, looked oh-so adorable.

"Kking?!"

The sound coming out of his mouth even resembled a puppy.

'What the hell is this?!'

Of course, he suffered a full-on panic attack at that moment.

< 13. A Small Footstep (1) > Fin

Chapter 44: A Small Footstep (2)

On the promised day with Kim Yu-Rin and the dinner, Sae-Jin was busy paying careful attention to his attire, going as far as even checking out the pages of fashion magazines. Although, his careful attention was nothing more than dressing up the same as on those pages...

"...It's not bad?"

Weirdly, he looked better than he thought but not because he had plastic surgery or was suffering from the case of narcissism.

Whatever the reason, the height of his Human Form had grown another 2 cm to 183, and his overall build became broad enough make any clothes look good on him.

'But, it really is weird.'

He slowly scratched his sharper-than usual jaw line and lightly questioned himself. It felt like even his face had gone through an imperceptible change.

"...Almost like it's what a human version of a wolf might be..."

Wuooong

But his thoughts couldn't be sustained any longer as the phone resting on the table vibrated.

[I'll be arriving there soon. Where are you currently, Mister Sae-Jin?]

It was a business-like message from Kim Yu-Rin.

After sending a quick reply, he pocketed the phone and stepped outside the house.

*

Having arrived first, Kim Yu-Rin waited for Sae-Jin inside the restaurant. As he texted and told her to order for him as he was

fine with anything, she was doing exactly that when a call came through to her phone.

She was wondering whether that was Kim Sae-Jin, but when she took a look, it was actually from a man named Chae Young-Ho, a Chief Knight of the Team 3. A Chief was one of the sub-divisions of the High Tier rank, and it denoted the position of the head of the High Tiers.

"...Oww, sh*t."

Her forehead creased the moment she saw those three words on the phone's display.

Chae Young-Ho.

Even though her position as the Highest Tier was far higher, as his career spanned well over 25 years, he wasn't some nobody that could be treated poorly.

On top of that, this guy was one of those types that skillfully utilised all of his considerable experience in manipulating the flow of conversations which made him a tough customer to talk to. Even if they were in the same Knights Order, she really, really didn't like this guy.

"Hello."

She thought hard about ignoring him, but in the end, she answered the call. He was the kind of person to come intruding if she didn't. It was far more preferable for her to end it with a phone call rather than go through the ordeal of speaking face to face with him.

- "Oh, it's you, Yu-Rin. So, I heard. You're going to meet with the Society chairperson Kim Sae-Jin, yes?"

She spat out a long sigh from the get-go.

Even though she was in the higher position, he always addressed her with barely any acknowledgment towards her superior position. (TL: the entire exchange between Kim Yu-Rin and this Chae Young-Ho is very difficult to TL, as the guy uses incredibly patronising speech patterns to treat Yu-Rin like a child. I did what I could, but... oh well.)

And if she showed displeasure, then he would endlessly repeat: "I've known you since you were 13 years old..."

Know what, exactly? He'd been forever trying to keep her in check; but seeing that he was a contemporary colleague of her father, there wasn't a whole lot she could do.

"...I'm about to meet him."

That was why, all she could do was lament and resign herself into accepting it as the case of 'age before beauty'.

- "Since the call got through, the meeting hasn't started yet, am I correct? But you should have informed me in advance when you made the appointment with Kim Sae-Jin. You also know very well the equipment problems our people are suffering from. For instance, Young-Jin's weapon he bought two weeks ago broke already..."
- "... It's been only two years since Knight Young-Jin became an upper Mid Tier. What happened that time was normal. You already know this, so why did you bring that up?"
- "Hu-uh. That is exactly one of the many problems you have, Yu-Rin. You think it's okay for us to play the waiting game... Keheum. Just tell me where you are. I think it'll be better for us if I go there personally. Wouldn't Kim Sae-Jin be happier to talk to two important figures of the Knights Order? A promising gem like him needs to be nurtured properly early on."

So, that was his real intentions.

Of course, Chae Young-Ho was an outstanding individual during his childhood which allowed him to become a High Knight. But as the aging process took its toll on him who had no special Trait to fall back on, he resorted to relying only on the personal connections to survive until now...

It went without saying that his connections were truly incredible. Even if he caused a disharmony within the Raven Knights Order as he did just now, Yu-Rin's father could not discard the man simply because of that point alone.

The words that best described the connections of Chae Young-Ho was – 'the founding member of the Society, Trilogy'. Nothing else mattered, really.

- "There is also the matter of Kim Sae-Jin having a deep relationship with the Goblin Alchemist. That means you alone is definitely not enough. By the way, Yu-Rin, I asked you where you are, so why aren't you answering me?"

"..... Ahhhh, so, where is this, you ask..."

Right on cue, she heard a chime from the restaurant's entrance. Yu-Rin turned her gaze over there.

It was Kim Sae-Jin.

"Oh, he's here already! Talk to you later."

- "He's there? Hey, wait a..."

Yu-Rin immediately hung up.

She stood up from her seat to greet Sae-Jin. This man was just too eye-catching even from a distance – after all, the man happened to be built like a champion athlete.

"Were you waiting for long?"

As he smiled and sat on the opposite side, the familiar smell rushed in against her senses.

"Oh, no. I also arrived just now."

She too, replied with a smile.

Unlike the earlier expectation of things being awkward, there were plenty of topics to discuss for the two of them. Such as, how did he find the Leviathan's summoning circle, whether the Orc Blacksmith indeed joined the Society or not, what were Sae-Jin's plans moving forward, and if the Goblin Alchemist disliked the Raven Knights Order, etc, etc...

Kim Sae-Jin answered as truthfully as possible. Even though the dinner was only 30 minutes long, the results achieved during it were still tangible.

"Me joining the Society... I think it'll be difficult."

After the great dinner had ended, Yu-Rin had to refuse him with some difficulty outside the restaurant.

"...Is that so? That's a bit regretful, but can't be helped, I guess. Oh, by the way, here. Please take this."

Strangely enough, Sae-Jin showed not an ounce of ill mood while accepting her answers.

No, he actually gave her a gift, instead.

With the Orc's Smithing Technique, it was possible for him to use other materials besides metal so he crafted a present especially for her.

"What is it?"

Yu-Rin curiously looked down on the box that was already within her arms.

"It's a gift, to ensure the Raven Order and my Society can enjoy a friendly relationship."

"Eh? Oh... I am grateful, but... I haven't prepared anything..."

She dug through her pockets hoping to find something but alas, there was obviously none.

"It's fine. It wasn't all that expensive, anyway. Oh, right... Here's something else as well."

After watching her reactions with a satisfied expression for a bit, Sae-Jin pulled out a piece of paper from his inner pocket and handed it over to her.

"And what could this be...?"

This paper, treated in special coating, could only be written on with Mana. It was one of the security features applied to important contract documents.

"...A weapon application form?"

Yu-Rin dazedly read the letters written on the form before straightening her neck with a surprised face.

"Yes. Miss Yu-Rin can use it for herself, or give to a subordinate you find promising. Once you have filled in the preferred type of weapon as well as the combat style, you can send it over to me. Then I'll pass it onto the Blacksmith."

"Uh... Will it be fine? But..."

Mister Sae-Jin isn't the Blacksmith. She swallowed these words down and simply stared at the man with a pair of very round eyes.

"It's alright. The Blacksmith said he's a fan of Miss Yu-Rin, so he can spare the time to craft at least one weapon for you."

"Wah... thank you very much. Oh, and please give my thanks to the Blacksmith as well."

Politely bowing her head, Yu-Rin carefully pocketed the application form inside her coat.

*

Hye-Rin: 「Please give it to me!!!」

Seung-Ho: 「No, it should be me! My weapon is about to break as we speak!!」

Hyu-Rin: 「Who the heck are you to b**t in here?! Get lost!!」

As soon as she returned home, Yu-Rin took a photo of the

application form Sae-Jin gave her and uploaded it onto the private chat room for the Team 1. Predictably, all hell broke loose. When she checked after taking a shower, there were 999+ unread messages in her inbox.

Yu-Rin read the contents with a content expression, before posting a new message while looking rather serious.

「One week from today – I'll give this form to the person achieving the highest position in the internal rankings.」

And their reactions were fast. The eleven members of the Team 1, who wouldn't even bother to reply no matter what crazy antics were used during normal times, all showed positive responses within 0.1 seconds.

"Uh-whew..."

While shaking her head and saying "these guys are helpless", Yu-Rin still had a full smile on her face.

"Ah. I forgot."

She only then remembered the boxed gift Sae-Jin gave to her. The blame solely laid with the ridiculous impact that single piece of paper had...

"Could it be a piece of equipment?"

Yu-Rin took the box and climbed on top of a couch. Without much thought, she opened the lid.

""

Her mind blanked out for a second or two.

Because, in this box, it was not a piece of equipment, nor was it a weapon; no, there was a seriously cute doll of a harp seal inside. No, on a closer inspection, it was not a seal. It sure resembled one, but rather than fur, it was scales.

Whatever it was, she still found it utterly adorable. And so, Kim Yu-Rin ended up hugging the doll tightly without realising it.

And only after a long while of hugging the doll did she discover a card inside the box.

There is a wonderful magic spell cast on this doll that will help you ease your mind and help you recover your stamina when you stay near it. It'll show a great result if you place it near you when going to bed.

It was the very first doll Yu-Rin received as a gift in her life.

*

Another month had flown by. There were a lot of changes.

First, Sae-Jin received an over-the-top celebration from the Monster Store employees for his rank advancement to the upper Mid Tier. Then, the rank of his Society also rose, from D-to D. Of course, the Orc Blacksmith produced two more weapons, as promised.

One was a Mid Quality-ranked Zweihänder. It was for that Knight Joo Ji-Hyuk who came to see Sae-Jin at that time. To match his fighting style, the weapon was imbued with the following attributes – 'Increased Sturdiness', 'Material Destruction', 'Weight Reduction' and 'Stamina Recovery'; four attributes that would shine brightly on the front lines.

The appearance of Joo Ji-Hyuk after receiving his weapon, what with very large tears threatening to burst out from his wet eyes, was altogether a memorable scene that Sae-Jin found a bit hard to stay and bear witness at the same time.

The other weapon was a High Quality product, a longsword. And this one went to an upper Mid Tier ranked Knight named Yi Hye-Rin who was a subordinate of Kim Yu-Rin. She was apparently someone famous enough to shoot TV commercials.

The sole attribute imbued in this sword was 'Bending', level C. This longsword would twist and bend according to her will, which made it difficult to predict where it would strike.

Yi Hye-Rin must have found the weapon very much to her liking because Sae-Jin received her three-page-long hand-written letter the following day. For some reason, the letter also contained her selfies, signed autographs, and her private phone numbers.

'I might become an artisan at this rate.'

And now... Sae-Jin was having a laugh while reading the reactions of the Internet.

The photos both Yi Hye-Rin and Joo Ji-Hyuk uploaded to SNS caused a stir not only locally but abroad as well.

"...But, what the hell is this?"

It had been a long while since he last read the comments sections, but as he read more, his eyes spotted something rather strange.

– A bro I know is a Knight in the Raven Order, and he says that as long as you have dinner with Kim Sae-Jin, he'll get you a weapon, just like that. He will give you an application form, and when you fill it up, the weapon of your choice will be made for you. I even saw the photo of it. [Upvoted 539 Downvoted 113]

LA bro I know is the Lycan. He'll find you and murder you. He will rip you apart like he did with those Vampires, so whatcha gonna do, eh?

L;; I am a currently serving Knight, and even I heard that rumour as well. The moron above me must be an escaped mental patient.

LF*ck off. Have a meal with him and you get an application form. It's the truth. But it should be very difficult to have a meal with him.

'Who the hell wrote this piece of garbage and pass it off as truth?'

Still, he found all of this cute, so he just chuckled and moved onto the next article.

< 13. A Small Footstep (2) > Fin.

Chapter 45: A Small Footstep (3)

The reason why a weapon was important to a Knight wasn't solely because it was directly linked to his or her survival.

It was, in a way, an "expression" of a certain gap within the same Tiers.

When the abilities were similar – no, when the abilities were just about the same – the strength of the weapon would separate the two, and the ranks would be divided.

And such a division would determine everything for the Knight affected by it – the annual salary, the fame, the prestige, etc, etc.

SFX for a sword swinging in the air

A heavy sword left behind a clear afterimage in the air as it descended.

The aim of this terrible strike was a type of turtle.

However, it was not an ordinary turtle at all. No, it was the Big-Giant-Turtle. It was a big and rare Monster that had to have two words stuck to its name just to signify how huge its size was. (TL: yes, that's the Monster's name in the raw. Hell, the author even wrote that in Korean version of the English words.)

This creature came about when a turtle couldn't absorb Mana properly and ends up mutating into a Monster. It wasn't particularly strong, but the strength and the hardness of its shell was not something to scoff at. Hell, the dang thing even possessed a sort of immunity that would negate a certain portion of every attack containing Mana.

So, although the payoff was quite good for its shell which could be made into weapons or armour, those Knights who relied on Mana rather than physical strength could only give up on hunting this Monster. "...Ohhh."

This time, however, was different. The Zweihänder, made out of black steel and currently wielded by Joo Ji-Hyuk, easily sliced apart the tough shell of this turtle. This was the resulting synergistic effect of the weapon's attribute, 'Material Destruction' and Joo Ji-Hyuk's skills with the heavy sword.

"Now that's something else. I honestly believed that when your Trait of Heavy Sword Master became known, you'd be stuck in the Mid Tier for the rest of your life... You sure did get a great weapon, huh."

Ji-Hyuk's fellow Knight who bore witness to this event sent out a glare and some words, both containing slight jealousy.

But Joo Ji-Hyuk didn't mind that and simply scratched the back of his neck while picking up the pieces of the turtle's shell.

Joo Ji-Hyuk's Trait, 'Heavy Swords Mastery'.

When he wielded a heavy sword that required the usage of both hands, he could demonstrate the maximum power and skills without any prior training whatsoever – a completed Trait, in other words, one that didn't need leveling up. That's why Joo Ji-Hyuk could become a Knight only a week after his Trait awakened.

However, it was wonderful only at the beginning – since his Trait was heavily affected by the weapons he wielded, it soon became his shackles and he ended up getting stuck in the Mid Tier for the last five years or so.

But that was until he got his hands on the Orc's Zweihänder.

"Haha... well, I guess so."

"Hey, by the way, you're going to sell that to the guys we promised to, right? Should I call them now?"

"No."

Joo Ji-Hyuk stopped his fellow Knight pulling out the phone.

- "There is someone else that I'd like to give this to."
- "...Is that right? If it's like that, well... but who are you going to sell it to?"

At the Knight's question, Joo Ji-Hyuk grinned widely.

- "No, it's not selling, but paying back the favour."
- "...What? You're going to give that to the Orc Blacksmith, aren't you? Something that expensive?"

"I'm gifting it precisely because it's expensive."

As the Big-Giant-Turtle was such a rare Monster, the pricing of its shell per gram nearly equalled that of pure gold. It was the type of item that would easily fetch hundreds of thousands of dollars in the market if they sold it right away.

"You serious??"

The fellow Knight's face became incredulous as he asked again. He was thinking that, how can a guy with a poor household even dream of giving away something so valuable...

"Yeah."

However, Joo Ji-Hyuk simply nodded his head with a smile on his face.

*

The requests for interviews came in droves. Kim Sae-Jin finally realised that there were so many media outlets in South Korea for the first time in his life when over 50 of them contacted him.

Sae-Jin was going to refuse them all at first, but then remembered the event in the past when the Orc Blacksmith got disparaged by the media. So, he gave the go ahead only to four of the most reputable, well known media outlets.

But even that proved to be quite a trudge. Of course he understood where they were coming from, but well, just why did

they have so many questions? Each of the interviews wasted a minimum of 30 minutes or so.

On top of that, although it probably was nothing more than a gossip-style throwaway question, one of the reporters even asked him about the Lycan joining the Society. The word Lycan was derived from the term Lycanthrope, and even though that creature was seen as another species of human, it still had some outer resemblance with Monsters, so that was enough of the connections for this guy.

"Ah, well then, this is the final, final, final question. Are you planning to admit new members to the hottest Society in town, The Monster? Whether it's a public, open recruitment, or as a special case. I mean, isn't it true that many, many Hunters and Knights are eyeballing Mister Sae-Jin's Society as their potential target for signing up?"

This was already the fourth 'final' question. It made him suspect whether the 'final' had various stages or not to go through, but Sae-Jin still smiled resolutely and soldiered on.

"Well, There is no plan at the moment. Unfortunately, I'm the type to shy away from showing his face around too much..."

"Aha. So, in order to join the Society, firstly a person should become more friendly with you, is that it?"

"Eh? Ah.... well, yes. It's something like that."

Fortunately, that really was the last question. The reporter thanked him for his time and bowed, before leaving altogether.

Thanks to that, the time limit for the Human Form was running perilously close. As he was hurriedly getting ready to go home, someone knocked on the door to his office.

[&]quot;Who is it?"

[&]quot;It's Euphras." (TL: 유프라스)

Euphras was one of the employees for the armoury Hazeline had selected. Her official role was a manager of the employees. As her Western name implied, her race was an Elf, and as a result, her pride was quite high.

"Was there something else?"

"A Knight named Joo Ji-Hyuk has sent a present for you."

Euphras brought the gift box and placed it on top of the manager's desk in a display of utmost respect and politeness, and without showing her back to him, carefully exited the office. Apparently, that was the Elf's way of showing respect to a superior or some such.

"...A present?"

Sae-Jin looked at that black box for a bit, before lifting open the lid without thinking too much about it.

'Shell pieces?'

The contents were puzzling, to say the least. Why would he send a present of these things.... But before he could finish that line of thought, the rising information window educated the ignorance of Sae-Jin rather nicely.

'It's rated at the level B+ for potential strength?'

The level for potential strength signaled the maximum attainable ranking for the material after crafting was completed. At a B+, it was just below that of adamantium.

Along with the turtle's shell pieces, Joo Ji-Hyuk even enclosed a hand written letter as well. In it, he chronicled how much his life had changed thanks to the new sword, and just how grateful he was.

'What a swell guy.'

The expression of Sae-Jin after he finished reading the letter was slightly unreadable.

After all, he had never received such a sincere, heartfelt thanks from anyone in his life before.

*

It was January - the month of the harshest chills.

The month of January might be so cold that most folks would rather not go outside, but it happened to be one of the most busiest months for the Knights there was.

Not only was the rank advancement exams held every half year taking place, there was also the matter of the 'Knights Duel', which was a battle between Knights with the honour of the participants and their Orders hanging in the balance. Plus, they also had to be mindful of the so-called 'Monster wave' that always broke out in the middle of the Winter.

On top of that, the battles of the Knights Duel were broadcast live since five years ago, adding further burden to the participants. A few Knights who enjoyed garnering attention to themselves obviously looked forward to the opportunity to flaunt their skills, however.

- "...I can feel the wall, you know."

Thanks to all these situations, a young school girl who should have enjoyed a Winter school break was training like hell as a Knight at the moment.

"A wall? What wall?"

– "You know, that thing. The insurmountable wall. Nowadays even my levels hasn't been rising.... Oh."

Right then, Yu Sae-Jung's voice stopped coming out of the phone. It was the slip of a tongue caused by her mind loosening up after finishing a lengthy training session just now.

"Your Trait is a leveling-up type?"

- ".....Yeah. Well, but, uh.... If it's Oppa, then it's okay to know,

but... please, keep it a secret, a SECRET, from other people, okay?"

When Sae-Jin replied he got it, she then resumed unloading all her complaints to him. Obviously, she would've been under a lot of strain, as she became a Knight before turning into a proper adult and had to train like there's no tomorrow for 14 hours straight everyday.

- "Ah, my current win/loss count is 8 victories and 28 losses. I know I've been fighting against Mid Tier Knights only, but still, isn't this a bit too much...?"

"Oh, okay. By the way..."

Sae-Jin suddenly recalled a way he could help Yu Sae-Jung out.

The Magic Tattoos.

Even if one argued a girl her age shouldn't get a tattoo, if it was the same colour as her skin, it would not become a problem during the so-called 'normal' life.

He should know, as he already tattooed one of his arms.

The tattoo he inscribed on himself had the following effects – [Tattoos that store Mana. Both the amount of usable Mana, as well as the recovery rate for Mana, increases.]

"You... don't wanna try out a tattoo?"

- "...Eh? What are you even talking about..."

As he expected, she replied in disbelief. After all, to inscribe a tattoo on not just any girl, but on the body of a precious descendant of a Chaebol was... (TL: a Chaebol is a Korean word for a massive business conglomerate, in case if you were wondering.)

Even he thought this was a bad idea. So, he muttered some incomprehensible excuse and tried to hang up.

- "No, wait a second, Oppa. Why did you suddenly mention tattoos? Is it linked to getting stronger somehow?"

However, Yu Sae-Jung had this insatiable need to become more powerful, and as her stubborn manner persisted, Sae-Jin couldn't help but continue on from where he left off.

"Ah, the thing is... it's related to my Trait, see?"

This was not a lie, but the actual truth. The Goblin's Witchcraft technique was indeed a part of his Trait.

"You can become a bit more stronger after getting a tattoo."

Taking a Mana Stone and turning it into a liquid form by using the Orc's Smithing Technique, and then by using the Witchcraft technique, this liquid Mana is inscribed onto the body. After that, the usable amount of Mana increased permanently, and the spent Mana recovered a bit quicker.

It was perhaps the greatest way to advance for a Knight who was very sensitive towards his or her Mana reserve. It wouldn't be incorrect to think of it as a type of an artifact that could be inscribed directly onto the body.

- "Huh?! That... what is that? What do you mean?"

Unfortunately, Sae-Jin's explanations were just too sparse to contain all the meaningful information for her.

"Ah, you see, remember when I said my Trait is related to my physical constitution? This tattoo thing is one of the ways to utilise my Trait. When I inscribe a tattoo on you, depending on what ingredients are used, there will be different special effects. If you use a Mana Stone, your overall Mana increases..."

- "Excuse me?! Is that really possible?"

SFX for someone tumbling out of a bed in an undignified way

He could hear Yu Sae-Jung messily getting up from her bed over the line.

"Yeah, it's real."

Thinking that there was no reason to let one of his skills rot, he

replied plainly to her.

- "Ah, but, that... a tattoo..."
- "I can do it in your skin colour, so it won't show up too much."
- "No, no that's not it..."

She took her sweet time before shyly continuing with the rest of her sentence.

- "...Wouldn't it be painful?"
- "...What?"

When Sae-Jin asked her back with a tone of disbelief, she began to ramble out her extensive excuses all of a sudden.

- "No, that is not... Actually, I don't feel much pain when fighting Monsters because of my Trait, but, um, since this isn't a combat situation my Trait won't probably apply, so it's possible it might hurt just a bit, right? It's not only me, but there are other Knights like that too, you know? I mean, there are Knights who are afraid of needles too. Of course, I'm not saying I'm like that..."

The following day, Yu Sae-Jung came straight to Sae-Jin's house.

"Euh..."

The tightly-closed eyelids of Yu Sae-Jung trembled ever so slightly. And that inexplicable tremble spread from her eyes to the rest of her body.

"Come on now, it won't hurt."

Sae-Jin thought her being like this, eyes tightly shut and her body shaking like a leaf, was quite adorable. But he couldn't start the tattooing process if she didn't stop shaking. He forcibly stopped himself from laughing out and admonished her.

"Yes. Please do it."

Her shaking body remained the same, but her voice sounded

strangely composed.

"I'm telling you, it's not going to hurt. So, just relax."

As he said, the procedure didn't hurt. And the tattoo needle he wielded was just for him to draw a pretty image, that was all. Honestly, he could do the whole procedure with nothing but his own fingers.

< 13. A Small Footstep (3) > Fin.

Chapter 46: The Menace (1)

"Yeah, I'm relaxed now. Please do it, Oppa."

Only then did her shaking lessen, just a tad. It was still a little bothersome... but it was indeed a massive progress compared to that 'earthquake' from before.

"Here we go."

"Okay. Oh, I want it in the flower... Euk!"

When the instrument touched the shoulder bone on her back, the cold sensation crawled up her skin and assaulted her brain. She got surprised so bad, her body froze still in that moment.

For Sae-Jin, though, this was actually better. He quickly used the lull in her movement to draw on her white shoulder, like one would on a drawing paper.

The chosen colour was really similar to her skin. It would be hard to spot it with a concerted close-range inspection, and the colour blended in with her skin so well, people would be unable to figure out whether she had a tattoo done or not from afar.

As long as she didn't use Mana, that was.

If she accessed her Mana during a battle or in some other instance, the area where the Magic Tattoo was inscribed would light up in blue and become very conspicuous. That was why the shape of the tattoo had to be considered carefully.

"It's all done."

"...Eh?"

Having had its Proficiency Level raised by a few notches, the Goblin's Craftsmanship skill proved to be truly exceptional. Even though its effects would be a lot lesser as he was currently in the Human Form, the detailed tattooing process only required three minutes to complete.

"Already?"

"Yeah. But the thing is, though..."

...It's gonna hurt from now on.

Those follow-up words, however, had to remain circulating within his mouth.

"Keuk!!"

Because, just before he could say a word, Yu Sae-Jung's pitiful single-note whimper blocked him.

Right away, she keeled over clutching her chest, and since he knew this would happen, Sae-Jin swiftly moved to pick her up and gently laid her down on the couch.

For the next ten minutes or so, like a very ill puppy, she could only suffer in silent agony, unable to even mouth a complaint.

Only when the level of agonising pain subsided to a level comparable to muscle ache did Yu Sae-Jung shoot him a resentful glare filled with tears.

"...You said it wouldn't... hurt. Why did you lie to me?!"

"My bad."

Kim Sae-Jin smiled awkwardly and scratched the back of his neck.

Even with that, she remained furious, her lips pushing out in a pout and her eyes continuously glaring at him; but as soon as she sensed the change within her body, her expression went a sudden shift. Her narrowed eyes opened up wide – and her clenched jaw dropped to the floor.

The person affected by the change could sense it better than anyone else. And not to forget, the Mana Stone she brought along as the base ingredient happened to be superior quality as well.

So, although his Magic Tattoo only was at the skill level of D, as

the ingredients used were just too good, she should be able to definitely sense the effects.

"Wow."

The very first thing popping out from her open mouth was a short exclamation.

"So, how is it?"

"Uh..."

She couldn't form a proper answer to his question and continued to clench and unclench her fists for a long time.

She was currently trying to work out whether her Mana reserve increasing was a dream or not.

And in order to accept this situation as her new reality, she needed to waste another five minutes.

"W, wooooow!! Oppa, what the heck is this?!"

Finally. At last. Yu Sae-Jung could indeed confirm that her Mana had increased after checking her own Status window. (TL: So, there it is. I was always curious whether other Trait holders could also access their own Stat windows and such, but here's the proof that they can.)

That was the beginning of the madness.

Kim Sae-Jin had never, ever witnessed her express her feelings this violently, this intensely before.

Jumping around all over the place with unbridled happiness, she then suddenly tried to rush in and grab hold of his collars as if to ask what the blooming heck is this?! before collapsing and fainting in the end from the aftereffects of her Mana's increase.

""

Sae-Jin chuckled lightly and after grabbing the phone, he called her butler.

If it was at all possible, he'd let her sleep it off here, but... well, his situation didn't permit that.

*

The Goblin Alchemist and the Orc Blacksmith. These two caused seemingly an insignificant but in actuality, a huge shockwave in the society as a whole.

Firstly, the Orc Blacksmith. His existence alone brought great deal of hope to all the Knights out there.

The reason was his shocking pledge to produce two weapons per month.

That pledge was kept for real and those two weapons found their ways into the hands of the owners. SNS, news articles, and those Knights who had seen the products with their own two eyes, were all deeply astonished at their qualities.

The ranks of the products easily exceeded the level of High Quality.

Most artisans and masters managed to produce a single item every year. So, this was like the Orc splendidly smacking the heads of all those Knights who were expecting to see, at most, upper Mid Quality items from that two-weapons-a-month pledge.

And then, there was the Goblin Alchemist. Thanks to him, the potion drought that plunged the Knights and the world of alchemy in anxiety came to a swift resolution. Triggered by the grand entrance of the Goblin, the idle alchemists began supplying potions to the marketplace once more.

And that's how Knights' quests to hunt down Monsters that had grinded to a halt became reinvigorated again.

Unfortunately, this positive prospect only applied to the races living on this planet in a peaceful manner.

And the race that was feeling very nervous right now at the

waves of change brought on by the two geniuses was currently right here.

"The Nagas had sunk into the deep ocean, while the Demon Race is living a life of hell stuck in the boundary between the worlds. Truly... these are the lamentable events, indeed."

The base of operations for the Vampires was, funnily enough, right next to the doorstep of the civilization. As a matter of fact, they occupied several buildings around the city of Seoul, one of them being this particular one named the 'Leon Crane', located on the outskirts of Gangbuk.

The Vampires didn't choose to own this building because of the classic mantra of 'hiding in plain sight', but simply because of their business interests.

That's right – in order to continue living in this capitalist world, even Vampires had to get jobs.

"And that is how we are the only race remaining that still miss our old home world. Oh brothers, we are..."

"Will you just shut the hell up? What will you bloody do, when the Lycan catches onto your magic communication?"

One other big point that separated Vampires from the rest of the world – besides the fact that they had to drink blood, of course – was their strict adherence to a caste system.

An absolute hierarchy system of the bloodlines, it just so happens to have some relation to the race-specific Trait of the Vampires.

To these guys, talent was not some c**p that the heavens decided to hand out randomly regardless of the inherited bloodlines.

No, the greatness of a person was determined by the blood flowing in his or her veins.

That was why, this kid in his early teens could speak rather rudely to an old man with a head full of white hair.

"Keheum. Hu-uh... As I've said before, there is no need to worry so much."

"No freaking way. I am worried, and I am curious, too. I am curious to know how the hell the bloody Lycan found us in the first place? Those 1st gen Soo-ins... screwed around with humans and became insignificant threats. Now, they can't detect us, isn't that right?"

They thought that, with the passing of all 1st generation Soo-ins, there no longer remained any race that could detect them. And that was how countless Vampires blended in among the regular humans, and without a doubt, they would become the solid foundation for carrying out their upcoming grand scheme.

....But that thought process lasted until Lycan 'the Mercenary' made his entrance.

The motherf*cking mercenary that had seemingly appeared like a falling asteroid, out of nowhere. Already, five Vampires had lost their lives to this guy, and they were comrades taking somewhat important parts in their scheme.

The Elders, threatened by the existence of this Lycan, commenced in a hurry with the plan that was clearly not ready yet, and the crudely-put together operation couldn't even leave behind any form of lasting harm to the world of men.

And so... Vampires began to think that the reason for all the missteps of their plans were because of the legendary mercenary, the Lycan.

"That is... no one, absolutely nobody knows."

"What a rotten luck we have. We just want to return to our home world, yet we keep running into obstacles."

The home world. The place they lived before migrating to Earth. When the end of their world approached with an imminent Apocalypse, its inhabitants chose to migrate to another world,

Earth.

"Maybe the Dwarves were right, when they said they might as well perish along with their home rather than migrate to another world."

"...No, it is not. Dwarves died along with our world, but it is possible for us to go back to a living home world."

"Why the hell should we go back? Everyone's already dead over there."

"I explained to you the last time.... Fuuu."

The moment the Vampires migrated to Earth – 40 years ago to this day – they had continuously researched into the Fissures, the gap that existed between the worlds or dimensions.

When a Fissure was ripped open until it could not be opened any further, a single possibility could occur. A legend clearly recorded in the annals of the Ancient Tome, the Reversal of the Time's Axis.

Vampires wanted to enter the deepest part of the Fissure and return to the home world of the past. And maybe, avert the advent of the Apocalypse before it happens...

"...Are we sure it's going to work? If it all goes to hell in a handbasket, we won't be able to live here too, you know?"

"Of course it'll work. Our wise Lord, Rutekan has spoken. Are you doubting his millenia-old wisdom?"

"...That's not it. I'm asking 'cuz I'm curious. Even if I have doubts, in the end I'll follow the commands of our Lord and the Elders, so you can stop worrying now."

The boy replied with a nonchalant expression.

"...And that is the right way of thinking. As expected of the pure blood of a nobility."

The old man patted the head of the youth with a satisfied smile.

"Well then. Let us now commence with our plan, the Fissure of the Deep Water. Let us first drag it out into the world."

*

- "Yes. I've got the nameplate here with me. But, uh... what is this doll? It's small and fluffy and really adorable."

"Oh, that? Please keep it where it's most visible. It might seem like nothing much, but there's a special effect applied to it so you should place it near where you sell things."

Kim Sae-Jin gifted a similar plaque with the words 'Affiliated with the Society, The Monster' to the Yoseon Alchemy House at Hazeline's behest. And he also added a doll of what could very well be the baby Leviathan on top as well.

- "A special effect?

"That's correct. Isn't it just too cute? It's just a simple doll, yet isn't it strangely attractive? That is the special effect I'm talking about."

There was a special attribute added to this sparkling-eyed doll that would perfectly suit a 'shop'.

Sae-Jin suspected that the Alchemy House's takings should increase by at least 3% overall due to this attribute. Of course, he had already placed a doll on the counter as well as inside the manager's office in the Orc's Forge.

- "Ah~ It's a mascot, isn't it? Trilogy's mascot is a tiger, right? Ours is a lot more cuter, though."
- "...Eh? Uh, yeah. Well... it's better to be fluffy and cute, rather than all vicious and cruel and stuff, yes? And, if that creature fights with a tiger, it's going to win, hands down."

He was telling the truth. If both of them were treated as fully grown real creatures then, even if that tiger was a Great Tiger, nay, a Great Sabre-tooth Tiger, it would still fly away into the nether with a single hit.

- "Fuhut. I don't even know what to say to that. You're telling really tall tales every day now, aren't you?"
- "...Haha. I wasn't joking, though. Oh, if you want another one, just give me the word. I'll send it to you since it'll be nice to have it in your home as well."
- "Thank you. Then, please send me another one. I like its scent, and it sure will be good to have one at home."

He replied that he understood, and hung up the phone before turning his attention back to the TV screen.

It was in the middle of broadcasting the Knights Duel.

And currently, it was a showdown between the Dawn Knights Order and the Goryeo Order. Representing Dawn was Yu Sae-Jung, while a female Knight named Jung Eun-Ji was representing Goryeo.

They seemed to have some sort of famous rivalry thing going from way back, according to the subtitles on the screen. Unfortunately, though...

'Sae-Jung is going to win this one.'

The amount of Mana was incredibly important to a Knight – to the point where you could say, along with the Magic Strength, it could be called the crucial factor in deciding the victor and the loser.

- Begin!!

The Duel commenced; on Yu Sae-Jung's body, Mana rose and wrapped around her. The camera showed her body infused in blue Mana, before focusing on her back.

"...And now, everyone will know."

On Yu Sae-Jung's back, precisely on her right shoulder bone, a single beautiful blue flower had blossomed on the surface.

The adjective 'utterly beautiful' perfectly encapsulated the appearance of her back. The cameras seemingly didn't want to shoot anything else at all.

< 14. The Menace (1) > Fin.

Chapter 47: The Menace (2)

- Wow, what is that flower pattern? Why is it visible past the armours? Is it because her clothing-type armour is thin?
- It's irritatingly pretty. Look how the camera is deliberately shooting only her back.

The Knights Duel was so popular, it was shown live on both the TV as well as on the internet; Sae-Jin was inclined towards the internet broadcast as he could check out the reactions in real time.

Right now, the audience was paying far more attention towards the blue flower pattern that had emerged above the thin but strong armour, rather than on the battle itself.

But that was just a momentary distraction. All those things that had very little to do with the fight itself were forgotten the very next moment.

SFX for feet exploding off the ground

The first one to make her move was Jung Eun-Ji from the Goryeo Knights Order. She kicked the ground hard and rushed towards Yu Sae-Jung. A speed as fast as a lightning, she arrived at the spot where Sae-Jung was standing and slashed her sword with all her might.

And the sword drawing an oblique line shot straight at her target's heart with a pinpoint accuracy.

Klang!!

An ear-splitting noise resounded in the air, and from the blades in contact with each other, harsh sparks exploded out.

And from this single encounter, Jung Eun-Ji who had attacked first, definitely understood the difference between them.

One, the difference in weapons. And two, the difference in their Mana.

Eun-Ji could only bit down hard on her teeth. The gap in the quality of their equipment could be accounted for, somehow. After all, that girl was holding a weapon that every Knight in this place was envious of – the Orc Blacksmith's greatest work yet. But right now, there was another difference between them.

Why?

She couldn't understand why her Mana was losing out to Yu Sae-Jung's. There hadn't been such a disparity between them only a week ago.

So, how come? And how did she? How could this girl experience such an explosive growth during that short window of time?

Jung Eun-Ji had to take a big step backwards. She hated to admit it, but there was no hope for her in a frontal assault. She had to search for an opening...

"..!!"

It was right then.

Yu Sae-Jung's aura went a sudden change. Mana that had pooled around the blade's edge, let out a chilly blue light and her slightly bent-forward body exploded outward like a loaded spring.

Jung Eun-Ji raised her sword to resist against the terrifying onslaught, but the ultra-quick sword slash simply destroyed her armour like tofu.

""

The duel ended so quickly, it might as well be called anticlimatic. Even the referee was lost for words, and on the entire indoor arena thick silence descended down.

Two strikes. No, if one was to think of the first sword clash was nothing more than to feel out the opponent, then this duel had ended in a single strike. Such an absolute result was unthinkable for a duel between Knights of the same Tier.

But just who was Jung Eun-Ji?

Although she was older by two years, wasn't Jung Eun-Ji an outstanding Knight, someone who was comparable to Yu Sae-Jung in terms of talent and the looks department? And taking the hint from the relationship between the Dawn and the Goryeo, the media called her the rival to Yu Sae-Jung, even.

And more importantly, such a massive gap like this did not exist during the last week's trial duels...

"...Winner, Yu Sae-Jung!!"

Remembering his role again, the referee hurriedly shouted out the result.

"...How is it possible?"

With a hollow expression, Jung Eun-Ji muttered out dazedly.

The wall.

The limit one had to surmount in order to climb up higher, an opponent that sometimes seemed just impossible to overcome – Knights called that, the wall.

And Eun-Ji had felt that wall right now. In just one week, her opponent had changed in such a shocking manner.

"Just wait a..."

Jung Eun-Ji turned her crazed eyes towards Yu Sae-Jung.

But already, Sae-Jung had disinterestedly turned her back on her, and was walking towards the exit for the victors – as if she didn't even place Eun-Ji in her eyes. She didn't even stop to shake the hand of the defeated.

"That bi*ch..."

At the sight of her mannerless appearance that showed total disrespect, Jung Eun-Ji clenched both of her fists tightly and gritted her teeth.

Yu Sae-Jung, meanwhile, had to deal with the mic of a reporter shoved into her face the moment she entered the exit. It was nominally an interview for the victor. She didn't really like doing this, but still, knew enough not to refuse one outright during a live broadcast.

"What is the real identity of the tattoo on your back? The whole world is dying to know."

The reporter made a quick and simple congratulatory greeting, and then immediately brought up the matter about her tattoo. Since she already heard from Sae-Jin that the tattoo would become visible through the clothing once she utilised her Mana, Yu Sae-Jung could nonchalantly continue on with the interview.

"I'll reveal the truth at a later date. It's not something I can arbitrarily decide to share on my own. I apologise."

"Eh? Oh.... Yes, well."

At Yu Sae-Jung's dignified answer, the reporter also chose not to query her further on this topic and moved onto other questions. And she replied in the manner dictated by the Dawn Knights Order's standard PR guidebook.

After the Knights Duel had ended. Considering Kim Sae-Jin's position, Yu Sae-Jung did her best to beat around the bush whenever the topic of her tattoo came up.

However, this world was a wide one which happened to be filled with discerning experts as well.

The public guessed that the tattoo causing the unexplainable situation was some type of magic, and that prompted Wizards to step forward with their theories.

Wizards were the kind of people whose obsession for knowledge bordered on sheer lunacy. And with their incredibly diligent, fervid investigation, the truth behind the tattoo was revealed just after one day had passed.

The first one to break the news was the Tower Lord of the Gangwon Province's Wizard Tower, a Wizard ranked A, Yun No-Hahn who had called for a press conference.

"There is Mana contained within this tattoo. It's an innovative device to increase the overall Mana reserve of its owner. However, the method to utilise this is still a mystery. In order to create this tattoo, items with Mana in them such as Mana Stones need to be liquified first, but that process requires intense heat. However, such heat scatters Mana away, so the effects would become completely negligible." (Yun No-Hahn)

"In other words, are you saying that as long as one has the necessary ingredients, tattoos similar to what Yu Sae-Jung has can be recreated?" (Reporter)

"No, that is incorrect. There won't be any effects of any kind simply by tattooing oneself with liquified Mana. No, you run the risk of facing side effects, instead. The reason for that is, it's impossible to contain the liquified Mana within a human body just by tattooing..." (Yun No-Hahn)

And when the contents of this press conference spread among the populace of Knights and Wizards, a riot occurred. It was understandable in a way, as Mana was their most important source of power which also happened to be the most difficult to raise as well.

So, emboldened by the curiosity of the public and media, they demanded the truth from the Dawn Corporation, the Dawn Knights Order, and more specifically, from Yu Sae-Jung herself.

However, the three in question resolutely remained silent over the matter. In rage, Knights and Wizards began casting the figurative stones at their directions.

- "Is it really okay to tell them?"

"Yeah."

That's why, Sae-Jin told her to say that his Trait was responsible for this ruckus.

He decided to deceive them by saying that he could only do it once a month. He figured that, although the clingy types would still cling to him to make his life inconvenient, there should be considerable benefit for himself once the truth came out.

- "Okay, I understand. Ah, and by the way, Sae-Jin Oppa. I went ahead and decided on the compensation for this tattoo on my own... you are not unhappy, right?"

"Huh? A compensation?"

He wondered about that briefly, but in reality, there was no need.

A compensation from the Dawn. He had no reason to refuse. And if a rumour of him doing a tattoo for free spread around somehow, then without a doubt, people would hound him like crazy.

"It's fine. I'm actually happier that way. So, what is it?"

- "Oh, that, well... You still haven't rented out the office for the Society yet, right? There's an extra building in Gangwon Province we own, so I shall give it to you. Of course, the gift tax as well as other taxes that might arise later will be taken care of by the Dawn as well."

Sae-Jin became utterly speechless. A goddamned building.... He almost wondered out aloud if that building was the one he had seen before. A compensation for a tattoo was a building – it might have seemed a bit extravagant, but he chose to think of it as how much Yu Sae-Jung valued Mana.

"Uh? Oh, thank you. I am grateful... but isn't it too generous for me?"

– "No, no. It's still too cheap, you know. And, um..."

On the other side of the line, Yu Sae-Jung swallowed down the

rest of her words.

There was certainly a bit of selfish reason for doing this.

If she handed over an entire building as a price for that tattoo, then that would set the precedence on the pricing from now on. If so, then most regular Knights wouldn't even dare to make a request for a tattoo.

She was aiming precisely for this.

"And?"

- "Ah, it's nothing. Don't worry. It's just that... I am really thankful, Oppa. Really, the day I met you Oppa... wasn't the fate trying to aid me?"
 - "...I'm gonna hang up now."
 - "Eh? Why? Why?"

Since he had no such hobby of listening to cringe-worthy lines suddenly being read out in an angelic voice, he decidedly ended the call.

"Fuu. Okay, let's do it."

And then, he went back to the work he was doing just now.

In his hands, there was a rag doll. It was the accidental mascot of his Society, the little 'Athany'. The origin of the name was rather obvious, if one thought about it – from the word Leviathan, of course.

Whatever the case may have been, the reason why he was fooling around with this doll was because he had gotten an inspiration after witnessing the surprising popularity of the doll placed in the Yoseon Alchemy House.

He wanted to turn this doll into an artifact.

The only attributes he endowed to the Athany dolls were to gather the attention of people and let out a pleasing scent, and that was it.

Even with only those two, it'd be enough to treat the dolls as a merchandise, but the problem here was with them not being the type that could be manufactured in high numbers.

And if he wanted to sell the doll depending solely on the attributes imbued in it, then he had to make each and every one a really expensive luxury item that was sold in limited numbers.

Such a chain of thoughts eventually led to 'artifacts'. Accessories just like necklaces, rings and bracelets with magical effects imbued within, the so-called magical items. Ruinously expensive products with low numbers available in the market thanks to their unique magical effects.

But it was difficult to ape the magic effects on those items just by relying on the attributes alone. Plus, as this Athany doll had to benefit the owner and not the 'wearer', the difficulty did indeed went through the roof of ridiculousness.

The answer Sae-Jin arrived at was to utilise the Magic Tattoos and the Orc's Smithing Technique at the same time. This method became possible only after the Skill Proficiency Level for the Magic Tattoos had increased and as a result, he could inscribe tattoos on materials as well as on living people.

'The very first thing to do is...'

He began inscribing the tattoo on the back of the doll with a white ink, to make sure it would not be spotted. The base ingredients used were a mid ranked Mana Crystal and a mid grade recovery potion; the effects from the two combined would be: Recovery of Mana and energy.

'It's done.'

As of now, this doll of Athany would be able to recover its Mana and energy. But since a doll would be in possession of neither Mana nor energy, if he stopped here, then all his efforts until now would be in vain. He needed to go through one more step, the Orc's Forging Technique.

Sae-Jin changed to the Orc Form and while holding the doll in his hands, activated the Smithing Technique.

The additional attribute he wanted to add on top of the Magic Tattoo was... 'Spread around to the surrounding area'.

The doll of Athany became dyed in blue light before returning to normal.

Changing his Form back to Human, Sae-Jin quickly accessed its information window.

[A doll of Athany] Maker: Kim Sae-Jin

Applied attributes: Especially Adorable [B], Special Aroma [C]

Special Aroma: Within the radius of 60 metres, the aroma with the effects of energy and Mana recovery will be spread around uniformly.

"...I did it!!"

It was completed.

The value of this kind of a merchandise would be amazing as long as its effects were proven.

Its ability to recover spent Mana reminded one of the famed Mana Springs – and to build one of those, an astronomical sum of moolah was required to do so. Of course, he was not claiming that one Athany doll would work just as well as a real Mana Spring.

'At least, I should ask someone.'

Now that the product was ready, the remaining work was to get its effects verified and register it in the patent office. So, Sae-Jin called the person who could take care of such work.

And in the following morning.

Waking up from all the chaos outside his house and still half

submerged in the dream land, Sae-Jin opened the front door.

At the same time, countless eyes of Knights and Wizards converged on him.

""

As Sae-Jin stood there, totally dazed, they began moving their mouths first.

And well, he got to find out for the first time just how loud human voices could become, on this day.

< 14. The Menace (2) > Fin.

Chapter 48: The Menace (3)

In all 23 years of his life, Kim Sae-Jin had never seen this many Knights and Wizards gathered up in one place.

"I have a question to ask you!! How does your Trait manifest – hey, stop shoving, man!!"

"The compensation for Yu Sae-Jung's tattoo was the Ruten Building in the Gangwon Province, was it not?"

This place, where Knights, Wizards and even reporters all mixed in, was a scene of pure chaos. Hell, some Wizards used magic spells to levitate themselves and started shouting out their questions from the air.

While Sae-Jin was dazedly admiring this chaos, the crowd jostled and pushed and shoved until they were right by his doorstep. If he didn't do something right away, they might rush inside his house, so Sae-Jin hastily slammed the door shut.

"...What the hell."

Kkhung!!

Sae-Jin muttered absentmindedly as a sound of the human wave crashing into the closed door entered his ears.

This was somewhat unexpected. He definitely said he could only do the tattoo thing once a month, plus the price of getting one on Sae-Jung was a whole dang building. So, he truly didn't even imagine these many people would seek him out like this.

Wuooong-

Right on cue, his phone vibrated.

"H, hello?"

- "Ah, hello, Mister Sae-Jin. This is Park Hyun-Oh."

Park Hyun-Oh was the butler as well as the Chief Secretary in the

Dawn CEO's household. He was there back when Yu Sae-Jung didn't know him and acted rudely – back when they encountered the Troll. He was the guy who quickly called the Knights to avert a big disaster. (TL: Well, it's official – Park Hyun-Oh it is, then. That other guy is now completely forgotten...)

"Hello. But what can I do for you..."

- "Firstly, I'd like to convey our unreserved apology at your great inconvenience caused by our Miss."

"Huh? Oh... It's fine. I did receive something.... big in return, after all."

Sae-Jin tensed up in that moment. Was this guy calling to tell him that they had changed their minds?

- "If so, that's a relief. However... I assume it is rather disorderly outside your home as we speak?"

Fortunately, Park Hyun-Oh didn't even mention such a thing.

"Oh, yeah. It is somewhat chaotic, yes. When will they go away?"

Sae-Jin hoped for the Dawn to swoop in like the last time and sweep these guys away. But Hyun-Oh's reply was against his expectations.

- "Even we're not certain. We too are in not much of a different situation than Mister Sae-Jin. All the Knights Orders excluding the Dawn have come to an agreement, so... regrettably, there is very little we can do to aid you at the moment."

"Ah..."

- "I am truly sorry."

As expected, even the Dawn could not easily withstand the might of the people combined with political will.

"In that case..."

- "Please, try to be patient until a suitable solution has been

found. And our Miss will be out of reach for the next few days because she is... being harshly reprimanded by the Chairman and the Order Master at the moment."

"Ah, is that so?"

- "Yes. Right now, she's in the next room, getting disciplined with a cane."

"Ah.... uh, by the way, it's not Sae-Jung's fault, you see."

- "There's very little anyone can do, as both her guardians are very upset by the fact that she had gotten a tattoo without consulting them first."

"....So, that's how it is."

Replying as such, Sae-Jin wished Yu Sae-Jung best of luck.

*

The situation remained the same two afternoons later.

It was as if reporters set up military encampment outside his home and they showed no signs of leaving.

And somehow, they had found out his phone number; text messages and phone calls inundated him at all hours.

This was, without a doubt, his own sin for underestimating the desires of the Knights and Wizards wanting to get stronger.

"Fuu..."

So, he had to make a decision, which he did. If this continued and one or two of them broke into his house, then an irreversible disaster might befall on him. Well, he could only remain as a human for a set period of time, after all.

"Hmm, hmm."

Standing behind the door, Sae-Jin tried to loosen up his throat for the short, impromptu press conference he was about to hold.

He breathed in deeply three times, then let out two fake coughs.

With that, he swung open the door.

"He came out!!"

As soon as the door opened, someone cried out and that caused a tsunami of humans rushing towards him.

Before they could start causing havoc, Sae-Jin shouted out loudly first.

"Three questions!! Meaning, I will answer three questions only!! Ask me what you're most curious about!!"

However, he couldn't understand any of the questions as there were just way too many people here and their voices got all tangled up. Narrowing his brows, he raised his hands in a gesture to calm the crowd down. Of course, it had no effect whatsoever.

"Tell me more about the tattoos..."

"The government, with Mister Sae-Jin, is planni..."

"Knights Orders are..."

"Wizard Towers..."

No matter what, the voices entering his ears could not go past one or two words at most. So, Sae-Jin had to let out another loud shout.

"Wait a d**n minute here!!"

He decided then, instead of waiting for questions, he'd rather one-sidedly start telling them stuff.

"I know that you have many questions regarding my Tattoos!!!"

Sae-Jin shouted out, hoping that the crowd would focus on him.

"...Am I right? So, I will speak up now!!"

Only then, the chaos seemed to die down somewhat. Sae-Jin breathed in deeply, then spoke about the point they were most likely curious about.

"First of all, I can only inscribe a tattoo once a month. And that is being very optimistic. This Trait requires me to spend a great deal of my energy, so even with once a month rule, it still poses a great deal of burden to me. That is why Miss Yu Sae-Jung had paid an incredible compensation for it. So, I'm telling you now, there is no point giving me this amount of attention at all."

As soon as he was finished, camera flashes went off. And there were some indication that another chaos was about to break out. In order to suppress that before it happens, Sae-Jin quickly continued with his words.

"And now, I will accept one more question from one person. Ah, over there, that gentleman!!"

He quickly pointed at a rather good-looking man. The person, who might have been an Elf, seemed taken back slightly by being singled out, but he recovered soon enough and threw out a question.

"What you're saying is, in order to acquire a tattoo, you need to have money, is that right?"

"Eh? Ah... no, that's not it. Of course, appropriate compensation is a part of the consideration, but..."

"Does that mean the fellow members of your Society, The Monster, will potentially receive a preferential treatment?"

"Eh? Ah... yes, of course. Instead of strangers, fellow Society members will be considered first."

He ended up answering more questions for the next ten minutes. Sae-Jin worked very hard to make sure there were no verbal slip-ups.

"Now then, please go back to your lives. This is a residential area; your presence here is causing a great inconvenience to not just me but also to the entire neighbourhood as well!!"

Finally, he shouted out loudly in hope, asking them to go away.

However, he wasn't expecting miracles. His thoughts were that, now he had cleared up some air, one or two might start leaving from tonight or so.

And as expected, Wizards and Knights stayed put.

Weirdly enough, though - reporters began packing up, however.

"...What the, where are you guys going now?"

Those who were not reporters started getting flustered by this occurrence. Even Sae-Jin was tilting his head as well.

"He said we should go now. And we already heard what we came here for."

"Ei? Since when did you people listen to what others ask of you?"

While this kind of conversation was taking place, Sae-Jin got to understand the reason for this strange occurrence with an alert window popping into his view.

[Following Skills have merged together: The Wolf Form's Howling and the Human Form's the Pleasant Voice.]

- Using his voice, the host can now potentially direct the sentiment of the crowd at will.
- This Skill will have varying degrees of success depending on the target's mental strength.

[Condition complete: 「A human's potential to create」 – Successfully combined Skills for the first time.]

– From now on, the host can combine Skills depending on the values of his Stats as well as the Skill Proficiency Levels.

Two days later, Kim Sae-Jin made his way to the Monster field after what felt like in ages.

However, he was not alone – he came along with a hunting partner. And, what a surprise, it was not his regular partner, Yu

Sae-Jung, either.

A person who was slightly unfamiliar; someone who carried a heavy sword on his waist, a Mid Tier Knight Joo Ji-Hyuk. He was the hunting partner for the day.

"This is great. It's so satisfying to hunt together with you. Haha... Now I can understand the reasons for your title, 'The Heavenly Gifted'."

In life, one would sometimes encounter a certain type of people you'd want to treat better the more you get to know them. Usually, those overflowing with simple, honest and good personalities fell under this category.

Of course, there were those bastards who try to belittle and take advantage of such folks, but Kim Sae-Jin was not an a*shole like that. That was why he found Joo Ji-Hyuk immensely to his liking.

"Hahaha, you're too kind.... Keheum."

But, although Joo Ji-Hyuk was a good guy, the awkwardness existing between the two was par for the course. After all, they had only met once before today.

"Ah, I also heard about it as well, Mister Sae-Jin. About your Trait and the special tattoos... Oh, please be rest assured, I'm not requesting you for one. It's just that, within my Order as well as others, the story is causing so much hysteria..."

"Ahaha... right. That is why I came out here in this disguise, isn't it. I became famous all of a sudden, after all."

Sae-Jin joking said while pointing at the hat that was pulled low and a mask covering his face.

This was a necessity as there had been too many inconvenient events happening to him lately.

For the last two days, he had to stay stuck indoors, unable to go outside even once and to stop them calling him all the time, he even changed the phone as well. Seriously, some female Knights called him in the middle of the night, telling him that they would do anything he desired, as long as he helped them out just one time...

That's how great the madness of the Wizards and Knights were, when it came to the matters relating to their Mana. Hell, even Hazeline showed interest in the tattoos and had asked him about it.

"Haha... you're probably right. By the way, your Trait is about tattooing yourself?"

"No. It's just one of the ways to utilise my Trait. It's actually related to my physical constitution."

"Oh... I see."

And then... silence. Joo Ji-Hyuk's face said that he still had a few more questions left, but he was stopping this conversation because he didn't want Sae-Jin to feel uncomfortable while answering them. Having figured this out already, Sae-Jin admired the guy's personality once more.

And so, some time after they had hunted two Monsters.

"...Uh, Oppa?"

A female Knight discovered them and lightly hopped to where they were.

"Mm? Eun-Ji, is that you? What are you doing here in the Mid Tier hunting ground?"

Joo Ji-Hyuk spoke while reaching out with his hand. The female Knight smiled and took his hand, shaking it. Then she took a glance at the person next to Ji-Hyuk.

"...And this is?"

"This person? He's a... my hunting partner. He's an upper Mid Tier Hunter."

"Oh, is that so. Hello there. My name is Jung Eun-Ji, a low Mid

Tier Knight."

While continuing with her smile, she also reached out for a shake with Sae-Jin.

"Hello. It's a pleasure."

Jung Eun-Ji – of course he knew who she was. She was the opponent Yu Sae-Jung defeated in the Knights Duel.

She took a closer look at Sae-Jin's face and then, tilted her head slightly while looking somewhat puzzled.

"E, Eun-Ji!! Why are you alone anyway? Where are your teammates?"

Seeing this, Joo Ji-Hyuk hurriedly tried to change the topic.

"Ah, that. I was on my way out just now. I came here on a whim, you see. The thing is.... there's a rumour doing the rounds right now. In SNS and in all the chat rooms."

"...Uh? What rumour?"

"They say Mister Kim Sae-Jin came out to hunt in the Mid Tier hunting ground. I thought that maybe if I lingered around here... I must be such an idiot."

Jung Eun-Ji lowered her head with a sorrowful expression. Normally, it was a common courtesy to offer a word of encouragement or something, but right now, two men could only look at each other and show off a pair of panic-stricken faces.

"Uh... so, uh, why are you looking for him?"

"...Just because. I also wanted to try my best, you know. It's like, I realised that the best efforts of mine is ju~st not enough."

"Mm?"

"Oppa also saw that, didn't you? How I got beat down so easily. But I just can't accept it, you know? How come that girl could use connections earned from the reaches of her family while I..."

While she was laying out her grumblings, Sae-Jin surveyed the atmosphere of the surrounding area. Compared to an hour before, he could definitely sense more activities of humans now.

"...By the way,"

Meanwhile, Jung Eun-Ji narrowed her eyes and took a hard look at Sae-Jin's direction.

"His face is... and his scent..."

KheungKheung-

Suddenly, she began to sniff the air.

Sae-Jin was slightly taken back. If she knew this much, then rumours about him must be quite widespread by now.

"Excuse me. Can you remove the mask, please?"

"... Not going to happen."

"Eh? No, I insist. Just a little peek will do..."

As if she had seen through the ruse, she took a big step towards Sae-Jin.

"Eun-Ji, why don't we get out of here first? This hunting ground is a bit too much for you."

Right on cue, Joo Ji-Hyuk stepped in front of Jung Eun-Ji and then sent a signal to Sae-Jin with his eyes.

"Huh? Yeah, I know, but Oppa, can you step aside for a second?"

"No can do. You're coming with me to the lower Mid Tier ground first."

"I understand, so will you just move aside?!"

"Hey, just wait a minute here."

"What the, Oppa, what gives?!"

As the two of them raised a ruckus, it caused other Knights to hear the commotion and they started coming closer in order to investigate while hoping against hope.

"H, hey, what is that!!!"

Jung Eun-Ji then used the most common-est distraction method there ever was.

"What, what?"

And then, Joo Ji-Hyuk fell for it like a chump.

"MOVE!!"

By the time Eun-Ji successfully shoved Ji-Hyuk aside, Sae-Jin had long disappeared from his spot.

Gritting her teeth and stomping on the ground in anger, Eun-Ji stood in front of Joo Ji-Hyuk and confronted him.

"It was him, wasn't he?"

She glared at him with a pair of blazing eyes and asked.

"What are you talking about? Besides that, what are you doing right now? It was just a rumour, but you stepped into the Mid Tier ground all alone?!"

"As long as I don't get ambushed, it's fine in this low-danger area. But that aside, why... Ah! They said there was one other person alongside Kim Sae-Jin. And that guy was you, Oppa?!"

"...What the heck is this girl even saying?"

Although there were huge dollops of cold sweat pouring out of him, Joo Ji-Hyuk still valiantly pretended with all his might.

And later that day, after returning home, Sae-Jin decided not to go outside of his house for the next week or so.

< 14. The Menace (3) > Fin.

Chapter 49: The Menace (4)

After feeling the suffocation of being confined to his house, Sae-Jin belatedly decided to search for any information available on the Leviathan.

His reasoning was that the final evolved form for his 'Feeble Sea Monster' was almost certainly the Leviathan. And he thought that there must be some commonality in the way the abilities of his new form and that of the legendary sea creature operated.

...Of course, he still had no idea how the heck such a cute, defenseless little thing could evolve into something so terrifying but, well.

Whatever. Sae-Jin dived into the World Wide Web. As expected, internet was the hub of all information gathering, and he found quite a few things about Leviathans in it.

However – maybe because a Leviathan was a creature to be avoided at all costs and not an opponent to fight head on, there didn't seem to be that many first-hand accounts out there. Most of the stuff he found online were either recap of the legends of the past, or folktale-like stories busy chasing after clouds.

'It's easy to mistake a Leviathan as a gentle creature as it spends half a day in slumber. However, as its nature is vicious, it would definitely attack any lifeforms entering its territory. A mysterious point to consider here is that, although the Leviathan lives in water, it can fire incredibly hot magma out of its mouth...'

As he sifted through this and that info for more than an hour, Sae-Jin finally found the information on the Leviathan's immediately known abilities.

'The origin of Mana is nature, and all nature stems from water. And that is why, seeing a Leviathan freely wielding Mana found in the atmosphere, is not a mystery at all.' 'The Leviathan can instinctively understand Mana existing in solid and liquid matter that comes in contact with its body, and it can also potentially replicate this Mana.'

It was as if a lightbulb went off inside his head.

This could be an unexpected way to utilise the skill 'Ruler of the Water'.

He hurriedly got up and went to the bathroom.

Sae-Jin filled the bathtub with water and changed into the baby Leviathan form. And then, he repeatedly tried to divide the small amount of 'Mana' already present in this tub of water.

Lo and behold, as he performed this task, the Proficiency Level that seemed like it would remain stuck in F-forever, began to improve ever so slightly. And he also got to witness a truly mystical scene of nearly imperceptible Mana separating from water.

However, the problem was with his mental strength.

"*whine*"

When he repeated did this exercise for the next 20 minutes, his head suddenly became dizzy and all strength left his body at once.

This was the so-called 'groggy' state, achieved after exhausting his Mana completely.

As this was the first time for Sae-Jin to experience this state, the side effects proved to be unexpectedly severe. And for the next ten minutes or so, a small baby seal with a horn on its head floated around on the surface of bathtub's water, unable to lift a finger.

The following day.

Kim Sae-Jin headed to the Monster field once more. However, he was not in his Human Form this time. It had been a long time since he last did this – he used the four-legged Ebony Wolf Form and

jumped over the wire fence.

"...It's really been a while, huh."

The first thing he did was to seek out a cave hidden on the side of a mountain, located in the Lowest Tier hunting ground.

Vines, moss and the overgrown vegetation covered its entrance, making it hard to tell whether there was a cave here or not. Indeed, it was the cave that faithfully served as Sae-Jin's base for quite a length of time.

He sure did live here for a long time. Even though he couldn't wait to leave this place behind towards the end of his stay, now that he was back after all this time, his heart was quickly dyeing in the colours of reminiscence.

"Hmm..."

The Ebony Wolf had morphed back into the Human Form before stepping into the cave.

"...?"

As soon as he entered, a strange object came into view. On top of the stone bed he made with utmost care, there was a square box that was wrapped like a birthday gift.

Sae-Jin slowly approached the box while totally on guard.

"...Ah, maybe."

Then suddenly, he remembered the promise Kim Yu-Rin made while parting ways with him, back when he treated her as a Goblin.

I'll definitely come back later with a proper present!!

That was a pleasant memory to recall.

Most likely, that box was Kim Yu-Rin's promised present.

She still hadn't forgotten that day's memories, not just yet.

He did wait patiently for her during his stay in this cave, but

maybe she was too busy with work to come for a visit or something. Or, she could have gotten lost trying to find the way back here.

Knowing Yu-Rin's real personality, the latter being the right possibility was quite high.

'Should I open it?'

He slowly opened the lid of the box while smiling gently.

""

Inside the box, there were a piece of paper and a single bracelet.

One could see the deepness of Kim Yu-Rin's kindness from this paper. She wrote a letter on the backside, while on the front, she drew illustrations in consideration of the Goblin not being able to read Korean well.

And this bracelet was...

[A Bracelet of Promise] Item rating: High Quality; durability 10/10

- An artifact that brings good luck to its wearer.

"A High Quality item?!"

Sae-Jin dazedly muttered out. Why a High Quality, though? Why would she buy something so expensive...?

Now that he looked back, Kim Yu-Rin did say that she was running short on funds after buying a piece of equipment, back in that restaurant.

"...Why would she gift something so valuable to a Monster, when she doesn't even know whether it's still alive or not?"

Of course, compared to the price of the life saved, it was still on the cheap side but... Anyways, she was an angel, wasn't she?

He gazed at the beautiful and colourful bracelet for a long time without saying anything.

He stored the bracelet in his body using Spiritualisation, and then stepped out of the cave to head to the Low Tier hunting ground.

The reason for heading there instead of the usual Mid Tier area was to grow his new Monster Form.

Well, since Athany was a sea creature, he should have gone to the nearby East Sea, but... no clear demarcation of Monsters by their Tiers existed there.

There were only two sea routes in the ocean, the safer one managed by the country and Knights Orders, and the other which was not. As for the rest of the oceans, it was hard to estimate what kind of Monsters would pop out from there.

"whine, whine"

Currently, Sae-Jin changed into the Feeble Sea Monster Form and was busy dragging his belly across the ground while going somewhere.

He was already more or less familiar with this Form's methods of attack.

The most basic one was to shoot jets of water from his mouth and once that came in contact with the enemy's skin, boil that liquid in high heat.

In the Human Form, he could only control the temperature if he was in direct contact with a body of water, but as Athany, all types of moisture and Mana contained within a 50 metre radius could be controlled at will.

But he thought this was somewhat lacking. So, he investigated more about Leviathan's information online and found out that there was another, much more fantastical way.

'Mana is nature itself.'

This was the method he had just barely began to grasp after

repeatedly practising countless times.

And that was an inspiration on how a Leviathan living in the sea could spit out flames or even poison that were definitely not water.

Wizards were always yapping on about this:

Mana can become anything.

And as a proof, they always pointed towards Magic spells as an example. Creating something from nothing, it was indeed akin to creating miracles.

However, in truth it was not creating something from nothing, as there existed the ingredient called Mana. Once one changed and rebuilt the properties and characteristics of Mana, that created the phenomenon known as Magic.

And that was where the significance of the skill 'Ruler of the Water' came in.

In other words – by changing and rebuilding Mana present within water, he would be able to spit out flames or poisons instead. In a way, it was a similar type of action as casting a Magic spell.

Unlike regular Wizards, though – a Leviathan had no need to recite those complicated chants since, as a distinctive creature-specific feature, it could understand and remember Mana hidden in all materials coming in contact with its scales.

'It should work.'

He succeeded once or twice practising at home. And now, it was time to try out for real in a live combat situation.

Facing against a Monster, he wanted to grandly spit out something – whether that was water, fire, mud, ash, light beam or even lightning, whatever.

However, his plan got ruined from the get-go.

SFX for the ground vibrating

Out of the blue, the ground began rumbling in an ominous manner.

Panicking somewhat, Sae-Jin took a quick look around. Trees and plants began to dance nervously and birds – or maybe flight-type Monsters – were hurriedly taking to skies.

'Is it an earthquake??'

If so, then that was a big problem.

There was a fairly good chance that an earthquake usually was accompanied by the so-called Monster Disturbance. This 'Disturbance' occurred when Monsters occupying Mid and upper Mid Tier hunting grounds rushed down to lower Tiered areas like a tsunami wave for some reason or the other.

When such an event happened, then there would inevitably be massive casualties of low Tiered Hunters and Knights – since, well, they would be out hunting in the 'easier' grounds that just about matched their own rankings.

'Let's just get out of here first...'

He was about to morph into the Human Form and make his escape. However, a reflection of light came from somewhere and stabbed his eyes.

'What was that?!'

Narrowing his brows, he changed the direction of his gaze to the light's origin.

"Gulp."

He saw a camera and a man busy operating it. The light was reflecting off from the camera lens hidden in the tall grasses and it sure felt like he was being attacked by it.

Sae-Jin's heart stopped beating for a second then. If he had changed back into a human while totally unaware of the camera... now, wouldn't that be the shortest route to utterly screwing up his

entire life?

"...Are they filming me?"

When he took a closer look, he saw a few more people behind the camera. The Lowest and Low Tier hunting grounds were the only areas in the Monster field that the regular civilians were permitted access.

He heard that, what with the programme The Qualities of a Knight hitting it big in the ratings, there were several other TV shows about Monsters currently in production.

Not only had he heard that there were three such shows being filmed within the Low Tier ground these past two months, Sae-Jin even saw them in action with his own two eyes.

Upon thinking about it a bit more, it seemed that he didn't have to worry anymore. Since they were filming here in the Low Tier hunting grounds, the crew would have been escorted by Knights ranked at least Mid Tier in case of an unforeseen emergency.

'Argh. Should've just gone to the sea...'

Athany was a sea Monster. On dry land, he just could not bring out his full powers.

However, it was only due to the various passive skills possessed by the Ebony Wolf Form – which remained active even in other Forms – that he even got to see out in front and get to hear his surroundings properly; without those, the chances were, he would never have realised that the camera was there at all.

On top of that, they were even using artifacts to erase their scents and presence as well...

'But, uh... they wouldn't suddenly attack me, right?'

After all, he was just an adorable little thing...

Actually, the crew was tensely filming him without taking any other actions. Since there was no information at all on a 'baby'

version of the Leviathan, it was quite likely that they thought this was simply a huge scoop to capture the appearance of a rare, neverbefore-seen Monster and were relishing the opportunity presented here.

"whine, whine"

So, Sae-Jin deliberately made cute noises and moved around as if he was swimming on land with his two short arms. And then, from somewhere, he heard nearly imperceptible sound of someone holding his or her breath.

'Hey, this might end up being a great advertisement?!'

He had already completed the registration of the 'Athany' character since he was planning to officially sell the dolls, although the availability would remain rather limited.

Whenever Sae-Jin moved his body, the camera carefully followed him around continuously.

Unfortunately, such a relaxed atmosphere could only last for five more minutes.

"Euahahk!! What the hell?!"

And that's how the humans, blinded by the sure-fire profit in front of their eyes, ended up missing the most important matter of all:

The small earthquake that happened just now, the ill omen of things to come.

SFX for a shrill scream of a woman

Truly out of nowhere, a life form descended swiftly from the sky like an arrow and ripped a leg off one of the crew members.

The torn limb flew in the air, and then landed on the ground somewhere.

At this horrifying new event, all eyes hidden behind the bush turned up towards the sky.

A Griffin.

A creature possessing the head of a hawk and the body of a lion – the flight type Monster ruling the skies over the Mid Tier hunting ground. Griffins were normally found within the boundaries between Mid and upper Mid Tier grounds so, one of them should not be here.

However, right now, this was an emergency. Although the causes were unknown, that earthquake from moments ago was a stark reminder of this important truth.

"Do not panic!! Hide behind us!!"

Four Knights unsheathed their weapons and took guard against the Griffin. But it was a clever Monster. It had a tendency of picking on those it judged to be the weakest, first.

"SFX for screeching wail"

The b*****d let out an ear-splitting scream and fell down like a lightning before ripping off an arm of another film crew member.

The female member's scared screams and cries resounded in the air, and at the same time, Sae-Jin fell into a dilemma.

< 14. The Menace (4) > Fin.

Chapter 50: A Doubt, an Endeavor (1)

"That, that, please do something!!"

"Keheuuuu..."

Chaos unfolded below the Griffin flying around in an aloof manner.

The crew member with his arm cut off was sobbing while grabbing hold of the missing limb and the rest of the film crew, unable to even think about running away, simply nagged incessantly at the Knights present.

"Just stand behind us and don't move!!"

Unfortunately for them, even the Knights were helpless here.

Now normally, in order to hunt down Griffins, services of Hunters specialising in long-range sniping or those Knights capable of exerting delicate control over Mana were needed. But these guys were just a group of escorts consisting of two Mid Tier and another two low Mid Tier Knights.

No one could have imagined that a Griffin might make an appearance in the Low Tier hunting ground today, of all things.

'It can't be helped, huh.'

Kim Sae-Jin finally made his decision – to help them out. If he let them be like that, then the Knights might be fine but the film crew would no doubt get 100% wiped out.

So for now, he readied several warning shots. He extracted all the moisture in the ground into his body, before moving them to his mouth.

There was still one more step to go through, though.

Since Griffins feared fire, he thought of converting the water in his mouth into flames and then, shoot.

"Phew~ phew~"

He wasn't making that sound deliberately – it was just that, they came out when he ejected water out of his mouth.

But quite unlike what the enthusiasm-draining sound effects suggested, the destructive force behind the streams of flame coming out of his mouth was something else entirely. The flames shot out superfast in a dead-straight line and seriously threatened the Griffin.

The Monster showed an indication of panic at the flames flying at it like lightning and twisted its body this way and that while trying to take evasive actions.

"...?"

And the Knights as well as the film crew gazed at the flamespewing unidentified lifeform with a bunch of dazed eyes.

Just what was the identity of this cute creature shooting jets of flame that threatened the Griffin, all the while making the phew, phew sound?

This scene was, honestly speaking, something a person may or may not get to see in ten, no, fifty years or some such. All those present desperately burned this sight into their retinas.

"rough, angry screeching wail"

The Griffin let out a coarse roar. At that moment, everyone tensed up.

The Knights moved to protect the horned seal (?) aiding them, from the sudden descent of the Griffin.

But fortunately enough, the airborne creature just circled around once in the sky before flying off to elsewhere.

The Knights could only look on at the sight of the retreating Monster in a daze.

"...It's coming here."

One of the film crew members muttered out and that jolted the Knights out of their stupor; they got ready for another battle quickly.

But when they saw the figure crawling on the ground towards them, they ended up slowly lowering their weapons.

"Why is it approaching us?"

A Knight murmured audibly.

This strange creature used its two arms to drag itself across the ground and approached the group, until stopping before the crew member who had lost the arm and was currently unconscious from the shock.

Only then, the rest of the film crew and the Knights broke out from the firm grips of this dream-like event and hurriedly got closer to the person with the horrific injury.

"...What is it doing?"

But they paused where they stood once more.

This seal (?) was busy spitting out what seemed to be saliva on top of the fainted crew member.

'The effects of a healing potion, this should be enough, right?'

Sae-Jin had made numerous potions so far, and this body of the Leviathan understood these liquids' properties well enough already.

A Leviathan could sense the flow of Mana with its body. Even though he could not explain it, this body already knew how to reconfigure Mana present in water to match the properties of a potion.

"...Huh?!"

When the liquid that seemed like the Monster's saliva landed on the area of the missing limb, a blue haze began rising up from there quite suddenly. "Uh, this is... Hey man. Hey, where is the severed arm? Is it still usable?"

The Knight who looked like the one in charge shouted out, and another Knight hurriedly went into the thicket to locate the arm and brought it out.

The surface of the wound was horrifically shredded. However, the Knight still brought the limb closer to the bleeding stump of the fainted crew member.

The rest of the film crew had no idea what was going on and it showed on their confused expressions, but all the Knights remained rather very serious.

Because, that blue haze thing was quite similar to what would happen when a potion was used. So, just maybe...

"Ohhhh!!"

"Wow!!"

The mountains reverberated with the sounds of people's exclamations.

The hideously torn arm began to reattach itself.

However, they did not have the luxury to dazedly admire this amazing scene.

There was still one more crew member with the leg torn off at the moment, after all.

"H, hey, can you go over ther... Oh, it's already going over there."

A Knight let out a hollow chuckle as he spoke.

Even without anyone requesting it, the cute creature was busy crawling towards the wounded person.

"Can you find the leg?"

The tensed up atmosphere became more relaxed at the sudden

entrance of a healer. A film crew member pointed towards the base of a tree, where the torn leg from below the knee was located at.

And without any orders, a Knight walked up to it, picked it up and brought it to where the grievously injured was.

The same treatment process occurred once more. When the creature spat out its saliva, the severed limb was reattached back to its place.

"...How the heck is this possible... Ah! Hey, man! Did you get this on film?"

The producer who was watching this scene in a daze belatedly shouted out in a hurry.

Fortunately for him, the cameraman with over ten years of experience was a type of a person who was much more at home looking at things through a camera lens rather than his own eyes.

"Whew~"

The producer let out a sigh of relief. They said that in life, a misfortune could be an omen to a lucky event, and so it proved to be true here. From this horrific incident, he ended up getting a huge scoop...

"Let's get the hell out of this place. Since a Griffin appeared here, we have no time to waste."

A Knight picked up one of the still-fainted crew members over his shoulder and spoke.

"...What about that little guy?"

The female crew member pointed with an unwilling expression at the seal that was laboriously crawling towards a destination unknown. Since it had saved them, wasn't there some sort of obligation for them to ensure that little creature's own survival?

"That Monster can easily chase away a Griffin, so you don't have to worry about its life. But besides that, hurry up, please!! The atmosphere in this place is taking a turn for the worse!!"

The Knights were not moved by her plea. So, the film crew had no choice but to follow them and quickly evacuate from here.

*

Arriving back home safe and sound, Sae-Jin received a call from Hazeline right away.

- "It's regarding our Athany doll. The testing of its effects are finished. And the patent registration has been completed as well."

"In only ten days??"

- "Yep. They tested the effects and found that the weakening of the wavelength during the period of ten days was almost zero. And taking into account the differences in the surrounding environment, it was deemed to be zero, so we ended up getting the result of 'perpetual effect' really quickly. But seriously, how did you make this doll? A doll type artifact that can restore energy and Mana... Just how were you able to add those magic effects to a doll?"

"Ah... well, I used a variety of methods, you see."

It seemed that the Athany doll's final classification was decided as an artifact for real now.

Scratching his cheek, he turned on the TV.

- "Did you already figure out a way to sell it?"

"Eh? Oh, that..."

He did think of a way.

No matter how great the effects of the Athany doll was, they could not be determined by one's eyes alone.

So, if he set the price way too high, then no one would buy it regardless of the product's rating.

The doll's main ingredients, a low Mid grade recovery potion and

a medium quality Mana Crystal, would cost upwards of \$900 grand together. So, if he set the price too low, then not only there wouldn't be much profit to be made, he might even run into problems in the future when he wanted to raise it.

"I am going to gift one each to the Raven and the Dawn Knights Orders."

So he decided to gift – as a bait – the first two to the most influential Knights Orders out there.

And since the Knights affiliated with famous Orders possessed keener senses, they should be able to realise the benefits within a month or so, which then would lead to rumours spreading around. Especially so with the Dawn's people, who were already well known to be loose-lipped when it came to posting stuff on SNS.

- "Ahhhh. That might be a good plan as well."

Hazeline easily saw through Sae-Jin's schemes. His ideas weren't all that shocking, though. Lately, as the Knights' influence in the world at large increased, there had been a concurrent increase in the number of private corporations sponsoring Knights Orders while asking them to use their wares in public and what not.

- "If so, would you like me to send one over to the Dawn Order?"
"Yes. Please do."

The conversation ended with that exchange. Sae-Jin turned his attention back to the TV.

Right on cue, it was showing a news broadcast reporting on the disturbance at the Monster field today.

The news was saying that the origin of the disturbance was a Fissure opening up on the ocean floor in the East Coast.

A deluge of powerful Monsters poured out from a Fissure measuring 5.0 in magnitude that had opened there. The resident Monsters in the Mid Tier hunting ground sensed the dangers first and in panic, they tried to distance themselves away from the ocean, resulting in the rushing Monsters, the Disturbance.

The broadcast then said, currently Knights and Wizards had responded speedily, and after freezing the ocean's surface right above the Fissure, they started the operation to clean out the Monsters.

- However, there was a case of receiving an unexpected aid during all this chaos.
 - "...Huh?"
- And that aid was from this mysterious, previously undiscovered and arguably the cutest Monster there is.

Sae-Jin watched the news with a puzzled expression. He sure as hell wasn't expecting the reveal this soon.

Since they treated it as a huge scoop, he thought the producers would hold it back until their programme was ready to air, but...

- Today, a production team shooting a documentary called 'The Ecosystem of Monsters' was attacked by a Griffin...

'Oh. It's just an advertisement...'

Sae-Jin understood right away after listening to the anchor's words. It was likely that they would only show a short clip first, and then tell the viewers to check the rest out when the documentary goes on air.

- Let us take look.

The footage was edited to be as short as humanly possible. It showed a horned creature that looked somewhat like a baby harp seal chasing away a Griffin while phew-phewing flames out of its mouth. After that, it waddled closer to those grievously injured crew members and spat out its saliva which then healed the serious wounds.

- Wasn't that the most amazing thing ever? Nowadays, stories of

Monsters helping people out seem to have increased. There have been witness testimonials of a certain Werewolf rescuing several Knights in the Mid Tier hunting ground as well. And now, the attentions of the public will be captured by this adorable creature for a foreseeable future, I believe.

And with that comment, the segment on Athany had ended.

'... That was a nice advertisement, that.'

A great timing, it was – the unveiling of the Athany doll coinciding with this news. Feeling utterly satisfied, he was about to turn the TV off, when...

- And this is the next item. A crime attributed to the Mercenary, Lycan, has occurred again. This time, it was in Goseong area of Gangwon Province...

...With those words of the anchor, Sae-Jin did not.

*

- A cutie that's also kind.... Such a great little thing. I wanna hug it tightly. [Upvoted 1038] [Downvoted 31]
- But what is its identity? A unicorn seal?! [Upvoted 559] [Downvoted 108]
- Lating the Mascot of The Monster. You can see one when visiting the Yoseon Alchemy House or the Orc's Forge. It's such a cutie pie whenever I see it, but it was an actual Monster;;
- $^{\text{L}}$ \circ \circ A reporter already did an interview. Kim Sae-Jin saw it by accident and based the doll on it.
- Our Knights Order has the doll of Athany. $\neg \neg$ It's supposedly an artifact, with effects of energy and Mana recovery. But it came in yesterday so can't tell if it's true or not. [Upvoted 339] [Downvoted 182]
- $L \supset I$ of course it's bullsh*t. A doll is an artifact? OOO It's still ten years too early, looking at how Wizards act nowadays. Seems

like your Order is also made up of a bunch of losers.

L;; Do you even have any idea which one I'm affiliated to when running your mouth off?

L Why should I care. Probably a bottom barrel trashy Order anyway.

The comment sections of news websites were inundated with the story of Athany. But Sae-Jin was getting rather physically uncomfortable with all of this. Because of Athany and the Fissure developing on the ocean floor, the stories most important to him, the Lycan, became buried deep in the pile and showed no sign of emerging at all.

"Haaa-ah..."

Sighing out grandly, Sae-Jin fell on the couch.

Was it a copycat? There was a distinct possibility of that, but maybe...

'A full moon?!'

He definitely possessed a special passive buff effect only applicable during the full moon. Called the 'Night of the Wolf', all his stats would rise by 15%, and his aggressiveness also became stronger as well.

On top of this, he always went to bed in the Wolf Form, so... it could be a plausible theory.

"...What the hell is going on?!"

Sae-Jin roughly tousled his hair up as the frustration overwhelmed him.

Why? What is happening to me?

Questions continued to inundate his head.

< 15. A Doubt, An Endeavor (1) > Fin.

Chapter 51: A Doubt, an Endeavor (2)

For about a week, Sae-Jin searched for every scrap of information there was for the Lycan.

There was a total of three crimes committed which he had no memories of; and according to what he found, all the bodies discovered were maimed horrifically as if a wild animal had attacked them.

So, he thought that... this was not the work of a copycat.

Everything was in doubt.

The continuously growing height. The sharply-changing facial structure. And the crimes of Lycan which he could not remember. What if they were...

'Is my Human Form being slowly taken over by the Monster Form?!'

Definitely, the power balance of all five Forms within his body had been seriously out of whack for a while now.

Specifically, ever since acquiring the beast's heart through absorbing the Werewolf's Mana Stone, the Wolf side had become much stronger than the others. After all, he could now throw down with a upper Mid Tier Knight quite easily in that Form.

"Haaa..."

Sae-Jin hugged his head that ached so much it might split apart; from the gap in the window, the grey light of the dawn's moon entered the room. That new moon's clear light seemed so sinister for some reason.

He did his best to avoid using the Wolf Form, instead preferring to stick with the Goblin, Orc and the Human Forms while sleeping for less than three hours a day.

To lose his own self, even it was only for a bit - he found such a

notion as an unimaginable terror, a powerful fear.

There was the good possibility that the full moon had the most effect on him, of course. But his current state of mind was too unstable to consider such points yet.

"F*ck this."

He even swore out loudly at this difficult problem that seemingly had no answers as he hit his own head.

On top of this, there were only 30 minutes remaining on his Human Form.

Only now had he realised that the Human Mode in the Wolf Form was not truly a 'human'. He remembered that time when his consciousness blurred after discovering a Vampire. And when he was fighting Kim In-Soo, he remembered clearly his body moving on its own volition.

"For a while..."

I should not use the Ebony Wolf Form.

Sae-Jin decided thus.

That would reduce the total amount of time he could remain as a human to around five hours but, it was still much better than losing himself from the unknown instincts of a Monster and become something that was... not human.

He began to rub his chin without realising it. His beard had grown somewhat, all thick and bushy-like.

But he was never the type where lots of beard grew naturally...

"SFX for gagging noise"

As soon as his thoughts reached there, he felt nauseous all of a sudden, and ran to the bathroom.

Since he hadn't eaten anything of late, only the dull-yellow stomach acid came out.

He emptied his insides for a long time, and then stood before the washbasin.

""

The face in the mirror was similar to Kim Sae-Jin's; but at the same time, also different from before. Of course, he might have made a mistake as his mind was not completely healthy at the moment.

But no matter what, the sharp eyes and the thick jaws...

They totally resembled a wolf.

*

At first, when the rumour of a doll-type artifact that could recover energy and Mana began to circulate, the public as well as the majority of Knights and Wizards thought of it as nothing more than a dog's empty bark not even worthy to be called a rumour.

An artifact was difficult to make. The consensus of those in the magic-related industry was that a material like a doll was just too weak to withstand the high level of magic enchantment required to bestow a single magic effect on an item.

However.

The rumour that everyone thought of as nothing but hot air – the Knights of the Raven Order ended up proving as truth.

"So, this is... that artifact?"

Currently, this was the 1st Class training facility of the Raven Knights Order. Most Knights Orders had divided training facilities according to the rankings. Rather obviously, the higher the ranking was, the better the training equipment provided.

Wizards affiliated with the 'Dae-Han' Wizard Tower were busy examining the doll-type artifact placed inside this facility. (TL: the word Dae-Han actually comes from the first two letters of the Republic of Korea's Korean name. *대한민국*)

"Yeah, but uh, by the way..."

The Knight tasked with showing these Wizards around was actually feeling rather nervous at the moment. He was afraid that these guys might start touching the doll or stuff like that.

One could say, this was a case of the so-called reversal of fortunes. This doll, Athany, was left forgotten on the shelves of the 4th Class training facility, or sometimes even, thrown around and discarded on the floor.

But now, the very same Athany was sitting pretty in the middle of the 1st Class facility, protected by the magic-reinforced glass case. Now, it was being treated with utmost care after transforming into one of the Raven's treasures.

"Excuse me... Can you step back for a bit there? I think Athany is a little afraid of you."

" "

Wizards all showed disbelieving faces, but they still did as told and moved away.

"It's really faint, but there definitely is a strange aura coming off of it. When did you first notice this doll's effects?"

"It hasn't been long. Has it been a week? At first, we left this doll by the 4th Class training facility and nobody paid attention to it, but then, the efficiency of lower ranked Knights began to improve dramatically. They began to train for three hours or more, when two used to be their limit. And the rate of their Mana recovery was also abnormally fast – but only within that training facility."

At that revelation, Wizards' lips went 'O' shaped as they exclaimed slightly. Just from the words alone, wasn't the effects just wonderful?

"And there were no noticeable changes in the Mana Spring?"

"That's correct. Finding this event strange, we took a

measurement of Mana's concentration in the 4th Class training facility and found that the recovery rate there was higher than the 1st Class facility. And that's when we discovered the doll's effects as we investigated the cause of this change."

"Hmmmm...."

A Wizard made a puzzled face and tilted his head.

According to their estimates, the story was that this doll possessed abilities to aid in recovering Mana as well as one's energy.

However, these two recovery abilities were expensive enough to be only found added to high-class wearable accessories. To his knowledge, there hadn't been a way invented yet to let the effects permeate around like an aura...

"I heard the Dawn also received this doll as a gift.... But why are they remaining silent over this matter?"

"They tend to monopolise the good stuff, don't they. Most likely, they realised the effects well before we have. Just that, they are keeping their mouths shut."

"...Hmm."

The Wizard took another glance at the doll.

He thought that, when the clueless government officials approved of a strange artifact, they were wasting their time once more... But honestly now, he really wanted to dissect that doll. Of course, considering its effects, it should be incredibly expensive, but if he could just find out what its secrets were, then...

"You can not."

The Wizard was blocked the moment the guiding Knight noticed the perverted light shining in those eyes. The Wizard let out a fake cough and then in a serious tone, asked, "Keheum. How much did you say it was?"

- "From what I hear, you can't buy it even if you wanted to."
- "...As expected, then. It should be impossible to mass manufacture an artifact like this."

"Yep. And with the situation as is, where even the news outlets have reported on the doll's proven effects, not only the local organizations but even the international bodies have apparently lodged requests for purchase to 'The Monster' Society as well."

The Wizard nodded his head. Obviously, stories related to this doll were trending big time in overseas social media forums as well.

"But the Society itself isn't giving out any replies yet. That's why besides the Dawn and us, no other Knights Order possesses this doll."

"So, that's how it was?"

"Yes. Thanks to this 'shortage', I hear that the lower ranked Orders are apparently burning in useless competitive spirits. For the right to become the next owner of Athany, or stuff like that...."

The Wizards present chuckled slightly at that.

Knights Orders and their Knights – from the point of view of these Wizards, they were the types that became harder to fathom the more one got to know them.

*

- "...You are really, really okay, right?"

"Yeah. I'm fine."

Since his mind was preoccupied, Sae-Jin ended up missing the phone calls from other people inadvertently.

But his mind had calmed down after a month – to the point of being able to welcome the fact that there was someone worried about him.

- "But why didn't you answer your phone until now?"

Yu Sae-Jung asked him. Her voice sounded genuinely worried.

"Well... I got occupied. You also know, right? How our mascot became this huge phenomenon."

He heard about this from Hazeline yesterday.

A doll-type artifact that aided with the recovery of Mana and energy.

He heard that both the Knights Orders and Wizard Towers were going mad with desire as soon as Athany's effects were proved. Which was understandable, as they were obsessed with Mana – obsessed enough to spend tens of millions of dollars to construct a Mana Spring and further hundreds of thousands just in its upkeep annually.

Hazeline added that several overseas Knights Orders and corporations had inquired directly about the Magic Tattoos and the Athany dolls via the Korean government already.

- "Oh, right! What's your plan on selling the Athany dolls? If you got any, we'll buy them all. We'll more than adequately satisfy your demands."

"Ah, that... Later. I'll let you know later."

For now, he didn't want to think about the complicated stuff yet.

Actually, only ten minutes ago, someone from the Foreign Relations department gave him a call regarding the Athany doll issue. It seemed that a famous American Knights Order had requested for a serious meeting with him or something...

- "Huh? Oh.... I understand. So, by th..."
- "Right. I'm hanging up now."
- "NO, WAIT!! Stop!! Hey, DON'T HANG UP!!"

As he was about to end the call, Yu Sae-Jung suddenly screamed

at him from the other side of the line.

- "...What's the matter now?"
- "Why do you keep on hanging up in the middle of a conversation?! I still have things left to say, you know!! Seriously..."

She sounded genuinely ticked off.

"Ah, my bad. I like to rush things, you see."

As he was a guy who used to do 2-3 part time jobs in a single day, he had this mentality of doing things fast without delay. Now that he thought about it, compared to those days, right now this was... a Heaven amongst heavens.

- "Fuu... We, uh... haven't seen each other in a while, right?"
- "... Oh, you mean as in hunting?"
- "...Khm. Right, yeah, hunting."

Sae-Jin deliberated for a bit. The time to go out on a hunt with someone else, well...

"My bad, I can't, for the time being."

...He no longer had that.

He deeply agonised about the possible solutions to the problematic situation of him slowly becoming an Ebony Wolf.

One definite cause for this was.... there was an internal power imbalance due to the Ebony Wolf Form becoming far stronger than the others.

The best possibility to rectify this situation was to enhance the strength of other Monster Forms.

And the other one was to let the Ebony Wolf Form fully evolve into a Lycanthrope.

Since the Lycanthropes were a subspecies of humans, maybe something might happen if he evolved into one...

Of course, both of these methods were not 100% guaranteed to work and that only made his chest tighten with worry. Hell, he even felt nauseous several times a day from the worries.

Whatever the case may have been, all the possibilities pointed towards hunting Monsters and so, wasting time was a luxury he couldn't afford anymore.

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- "Eh? But why?"
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Yu Sae-Jung hurriedly asked.

"That is... I've got a situation."

- "What is it?"

"Can't say at the moment."

- "…"

She became silent for a moment. Then, in a powerless voice, she spoke in a tone that clearly indicated how upset she was.

- "Okay, fine. Then... When you find the time later, give me a call."

"Right. I got it."

- "But not sure if I'll have the time la..."

He hung up the phone quickly.

Yu Sae-Jung seemed to be saying something, but... his old habit ended up rearing its head again.

"...It's time to go."

But the call had ended already.

Carrying a bag full of luggage, he headed to the Monster field.

*

A certain afternoon, with sunlight shining down.

A hunting party consisting of one somewhat overweight male Knight and two female Hunters were searching for prey in the forest of the hunting ground.

"Ah... So that doll is still in possession of only the Dawn and the Raven?"

The main topic of the conversation happening in the middle of the hunt was about the 'hot potato', Athany.

"Of course. It seems obvious that it would be difficult to make an artifact like that. But, hmm. I dunno if I should be saying this or not..."

With two rather pretty female Hunters attached to both of his arms and walking around with a triumphant air, this Knight was named Oh Dae-Soo, a Mid Tier Knight. He was the second son of the Vice Order Master of the mid-ranked Daebaek Knights Order. (TL: "대백"- Daebaek means "great white". I just couldn't name this Order as the Great White Knights Order as it sounds a bit... well.)

"Eh? What is it? Please tell us~"

"She's right. You should finish what you started~"

When he suddenly stopped talking, the two pretty female Hunters began acting coquettishly and teased his sides.

"Ke, kehuem. This is a secret, so... You must never tell anyone, got that?"

"Of course~"

Oh Dae-Soo did another fake cough.

Abnormally sensitive towards their rankings and gradings, Knights Orders would often compete aggressively with one another even in small, insignificant squabbles.

But from the Knights Orders' view, it could not be helped. One only had to witness the state of affairs where the public and the media were ridiculing the Dawn Knights Order after they lost to the Raven at the all-important Knights Duel. "Many people are wondering who could possibly become the next owner of the third Athany doll..."

The doll of Athany – it was the artifact trending hotly among the various Knights Orders.

But a month had passed by without a single sign of the third doll appearing in public, and the fact that the Dawn and the Raven were the only two to possess the dolls, were enough to fan the flames of competitive streak of the Orders in the lower rankings.

And the media, of course, took bite of this fun little bait; the public too began to hold a great deal of interest and watched things unfold.

Really, which Knights Order could become the next owner of the Athany doll?

Before anyone knew it, this matter had become a battle of pride between different Knights Orders.

"...It looks like we may become the next owner."

"Huh!! Really?"

"Wow, that's such a big news! What about the Goryeo Knights Order?"

"Uh-huh. Still with Goryeo this and that... Let's not talk about a Knights Order that's been abandoned behind, eh? Ahahaha." (TL: author made another pun-based joke here. Goryeo used to be a name of a Korean kingdom founded over one thousand years ago. However, he used the term "goryeojahng" which means leaving one's aged parents behind in a pit to die. Hence, my attempt at trying to save this joke. Which was not funny to begin with...)

The two female Hunters grabbed their tummies and began guffawing loudly at his lame wordplay. And feeling even more confident than before thanks to their laughter, Oh Dae-Soo straightened his shoulders a bit more.

"By the way, how did you accomplish that? I heard that guy Kim Sae-Jin is really famous for being picky. I also heard that the Vice Masters who got promptly turned away already number four or five."

"You're right. He's one difficult customer, that one. My dad had to work real hard to make this thing happen. He even had to stoop low to associate himself with a bottom-feeder employee of an armoury, someone he'd never even bother to take a glance at... Fuu. Let's just end this talk here, shall we?"

As if to show that he was distressed by his father's humiliation, Dae-Soo briefly paused his words there.

"However. Thanks to my dad's unceasing toil and hard work, the owner of the third Athany will be us. We've indeed brushed aside the Orders Sochung, Genesis and Goryeo, you see?"

Oh Dae-Soo further added to that in a proud voice, as if to demonstrate how great his Order's current status was.

"I knew it~ You're so amazing, Mister Knight!!"

With that, both girls clung onto him even more, and the smile on Oh Dae-Soo's face grew so wide it might have poked the heavens above.

He even thought, Oh, this is so much fun!! I hope that a Monster shows up soon so I can display my great skills!!

And Oh Dae-Soo's wish was granted not too long after.

"Uh! Look over there, an Orc!"

One of the female Hunters pointed to the hill visible past the bush and shouted.

"Oh. It's an Orc Jaguar."

He made a guess that an Orc found in the low Mid Tier hunting ground could only be a measly Jaguar. Oh Dae-Soo stepped forward, full of confidence. The pair of female Hunters followed him too, without showing any worries whatsoever.

Even though his reputation wasn't so good, but still, Oh Dae-Soo was a Mid Tier Knight who passed the required exams of The Eden. There was just no way he'd lose to an Orc in the low Mid Tier hunting ground...

"Hey, you b****d!!"

Oh Dae-Soo took great strides and shouted. Only then, the Orc turned around to face him.

And when their eyes met, all three in the hunting party froze where they stood.

The appearance of this particular Orc was.... somewhat strange.

Its height was nearly 3 metres tall; the muscles on its body were far more sinister than its brethren's; it was covered in blood from head to toe, and on one of its hands, it held a menacing mace.

That was the unmistakable appearance of a battle-hardened warrior; even though it was standing over there looking at them, its overwhelming spirit still traveled to where they were.

"...Maybe it's better for us to run."

One of the two female Hunters swallowed her saliva and spoke.

"I, I also think so, too."

The other female Hunter cautiously agreed as well.

Everyone in this party was thinking the same thing.

That was not a normal Orc. There was a heavy pressure comparable to an Ogre bearing down on them emanating from the creature, and from those pair of brightly burning eyes, they could sense the majestic aura of a heroic warrior.

So, how can any one of them call it a measly Orc now?

"...No. All you guys have to do is to hide behind me. I'll take care of everythi...."

However, when the prideful Oh Dae-Soo unsheathed his sword in a show of useless and reckless boldness....

SFX for a very loud roaring of an Orc

The Orc roared out in anger and slammed its mace down on the ground.

The shock wave from that terrifying attack caused the earth to rip apart like quivering snakes.

< 15. A Doubt, An Endeavor (2) > Fin.

Chapter 52: A Doubt, an Endeavor (3)

Inside the personal office of the Highest Tier Knight Kim Yu-Rin, located in the Raven Knights Order's HQ.

"I've told you many times already, haven't I? He's not answering the phone."

As if she was getting really frustrated, Yu-Rin pounded her chest while complaining to a certain guy.

About ten minutes ago, as she was finishing up her paperwork, Chae Young-Ho suddenly barged into her office.

And as usual, he proceeded to advise and lecture her for the next five minutes – then, he abruptly began asking about Kim Sae-Jin. She already told this man yesterday that she could not reach him by phone, yet like a blood-sucking leech he was tenaciously questioning her – going so far as to question whether she was lying to him or not.

"Hu-uh. Just how poorly do you take care of your personal connections that you manage to severe one after only a single dinner?"

He ended up accepting her words as truth after seeing her frustrated expression that verged on tears. But rather than going away, he began to take issues with her interpersonal skills instead.

"What do you mean by 'severe'?! Everything was going alrig...."

Yu-Rin was about to fire back, when one thought entered her mind inexplicably.

During the dinner, she identified Kim Sae-Jin as a prideful person, and that he also had a lot of pride in his Society, The Monster.

But she refused him outright when he made the suggestion of her joining the Society. Since she had legitimate reasons for the refusal, they just chuckled and let it slide, but...

'Could that be it?'

"I knew it. Seems like there was something, after all. Of all people, you just had to go and make a mistake with a person who's considered as very important right now... I repeatedly said this to you, didn't I? You and your father just lack the ability to treat other people properly. I should have..."

"I said, it was not like that!"

Yu-Rin slammed down on her desk when Chae Young-Ho began mentioning her father with a smug, know-it-all face. Slightly intimidated by her outburst, his body trembled imperceptibly.

"Fuu. You just wait and see."

Still fuming, Yu-Rin pulled her mobile phone out from her pocket.

"I'm going to call him right this instance."

Then, she called one number out of many, many saved numbers on her phone.

'Please pick up, please pick up, please pick up, please pick up. Please.'

The hand holding her the phone shook noticeably, and before she knew it, sweat drops were forming on her forehead.

And 40 seconds later.

"...He's not answering."

In the end, Kim Sae-Jin didn't answer and all she could do was quietly put her phone down.

Chae Young-Ho watched this scene with an expression showing contempt before beginning his loud lamentations.

"Ha-ah. Didn't I tell you this repeatedly before? If you continue to look down on people just because of your talents..."

"Why do you accuse me of looking down on people? You weren't even there to begin with!"

"I don't have to be there to know. You probably did something I knew you would do without realising it yourself. And that's why you fail to even recognise that you did it."

"No, that's not..."

Yu-Rin gritted her teeth.

Whatever the case may have been, it was true that she could no longer contact Kim Sae-Jin anymore; she stopped making excuses and lowered her head. Might as well, since if she kept on making excuses and brought up her own justifications, this torture would only be prolonged for her instead.

She decided to endure for now. Endure, then she'd try to call Sae-Jin tomorrow.

*

And around the same time.

"Eu-hhur-urk!!"

Oh Dae-Soo fell on his b**t from the might of the shock wave that stopped just short of hitting his nose.

The scene in front of his eyes were truly hellish. The ground was split apart in a terrifying manner as if an earthquake had struck, and from the gaping chasms, hot steam was rising steadily.

Gulp.

Oh Dae-Soo unconsciously swallowed down his saliva after witnessing this awesome sight. When he imagined what would happen to him if he was struck by that shock wave... he didn't even want to think about it. Most likely, all his limbs might have been ripped asunder.

SFX for someone's running footsteps

And from the back of the squatting Oh Dae-Soo, sounds of running footsteps could be heard. When he glanced back, the two female Hunters were making a hasty retreat. One of them fell face first, but got up in a flash and continued running, utterly not giving a d**n whether it looked pathetic or not.

And Oh Dae-Soo felt resentment towards the two.

SFX for a low growl

Right then, the low frequency growl of the Orc resounded in his ears; Oh Dae-Soo's heart stopped beating for a second.

His entire face covered in perspiration, he slowly turned his gaze to take in the sight of the Orc standing atop the hill, looking down on him.

He suddenly felt the pressure from the gap in their strength ruthlessly trampling down on his body.

"...It's much more stronger than I thought."

And in the meantime, Kim Sae-Jin was feeling quite shocked at the phenomenon he had just created.

The 'Fierce Strike', an active skill he earned after endlessly pounding Monsters to death with his mace. When activated, each of the hits would contain three times more explosive power and a special shock wave would occur as well.

At first, he thought of it as one of those additional buff skills but hell, now that he used it, wasn't this on the level of being just too d**n deadly?!

This was the fruit of his hard labour for the past ten days, indeed.

Currently, his Trait level was at 12. And all the equipment absorbed into his body via Spiritualisation ranked High Quality or above. Even though he was nominally an Orc Jaguar, his combat prowess alone should equal that of a Great Orc Warrior.

"Euh... euh!" (TL: No idea what this sound is supposed to be. Left

as is.)

As Sae-Jin stood there admiring his own growth, the Knight squatting on the ground finally manage to stand.

"Geuh, Fu-euh, euh!!" (TL: wait, is this supposed to be how an Orc sounds? Hmm.)

Sae-Jin then thoroughly enjoyed watching the back of the escaping Knight who was making strange noises. (TL: I guess not.)

That guy would take a few steps, then collapse on the ground. He then forced himself up, glance back at Sae-Jin, and tried hard to push forward with his shaking legs. It was a rather pitiful sight.

However, the previous attack with the Fierce Strike was nothing more than a warning shot. Sae-Jin wasn't going to kill that fat Knight with a bulging stomach in the first place.

SFX for the Orc's roar

Sae-Jin let out a roar that meant 'get the hell out of here'. Oh Dae-Soo got shocked and fell down again, but he continued his desperate escape while crawling on all fours.

"...So, why did you try your luck with me, moron?"

Sae-Jin originally thought of letting the hunting party go if they moved to escape on their own volition, anyways.

He put behind the pathetic appearance of Oh Dae-Soo and began searching for his next prey with his heavy footsteps.

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'Ah. My body's aching all over the place.'

After achieving the daily hunting quota, Sae-Jin returned to the cave.

These past ten days, Sae-Jin in his Orc Form confronted Monsters, Knights and Hunters for a fight. His reasons were simple. Maybe the conditions for his evolution were related with battles, somehow.

But that didn't mean he killed people, no. He did break their weapons and armour and sometimes made them faint but always let them be with their lives intact. Of course, there was nothing he could do about the injuries they got from these battles, but since no one lost a limb or stuff like that, he wasn't too worried about it.

'But I ended up with a plethora of skills, instead.'

Unfortunately, rather than the actual evolution, he ended up earning some strange skills in droves.

The Active Skill that boosted his strength momentarily, the Fierce Strike.

The Passive Skill that hardened his body like metal, the Indomitable Hard Body.

Etc, etc...

Of course, it wasn't as if he didn't like the number of his skills increasing like this. He loved it. Why would he not love his Orc Form getting stronger under the current circumstances?

'Anyways. It should be... doable now, right?'

The action he wanted to perform right now was to combine his skills.

And the skills he wanted to combine were the Leviathan's Scales and the Indomitable Hard Body. Ten days ago, his Skill Proficiency Levels were too low and it proved to be impossible to do it back then.

But the Indomitable Hard Body's level rose to C so he figured that now it would work as the Leviathan's Scales was still rated at F.

'Let's do it.'

According to the alert window, all he had to do was to think about combining two skills in his head. That was it. After waiting for a bit, a new alert window would pop up.

Just like now.

[Skills have been successfully combined. The Skills 'Leviathan's Scales' and the 'Indomitable Hard Body' have joined to become the new Skill, 'Leviathan's Hard Body'.]

[The host is unable to combine Skills for another: 89 days 23 hours 59 minutes and 56 seconds.]

- ▶ Passive Skill, 'Leviathan's Hard Body'
- Scales of Leviathan rated F-will cover the body. (Can be activated/deactivated at will.)
- The scales will possess a fixed amount of resistance towards all elemental attributes.
 - This Skill can be activated during any Form.

'Oh, I did it.'

His body moved excitedly in pleasant surprise.

Originally, the skill 'Leviathan's Scales' was a Form-specific ability that could only be used during the Feeble Sea Monster Form. But after it was combined with the skill Indomitable Hard Body, he had succeed in making the skill available to not only other Monster Forms but the Human Form as well.

This definitely could be labelled as a great result, for sure.

To test this new skill out, Sae-Jin activated it.

All over his body, scales of cold grey colour rapidly spread out.

"Ohhh...."

An Orc covered head to toe in brilliantly shining scales. Wasn't this a pretty cool sight?

*

A month went by since Sae-Jin began wandering around in the Monster field as an Orc.

Lots of things happened during this period of time.

The Fissure that opened up on the East Sea of Korea may have been subjugated without much trouble, but that wasn't the only one opening up on that day.

Another one had opened up on the Atlantic Ocean near the African continent. And it was still not brought under control by the united but ultimately insufficient forces of the African nations.

The rumour spreading around like an itch currently was that they would make the request to both the United Nations' own Knights Order and the overseas Orders for their military support pretty soon.

"The Demon Orc... Ah! You mean, the mutated Orc found in the Mid Tier hunting ground?"

"Ah, yes. Right now, we are... forming a team, you see."

However, the most trending topic in the Republic of Korea, which was located a great distance away from Africa, was something else entirely.

That had to do with a certain Orc found in the low Mid to Mid Tier hunting grounds, an existence some people took to calling the 'Demon Orc'. Apparently, one could tell this Orc apart from the others of its kind by the azure scales covering its entire body.

After defeating countless Knights without even causing a single death, some even began to call it with a strange nickname, 'the gentleman'; currently, the creature had become a sought-after big target for those Knights who were trying to make a name for themselves.

"Would you like to become a part of.... our team?"

A Mid Tier Knight named Kim Won-Jong was showing the greatest amount of courage he had ever mustered in his entire life, by requesting Yu Sae-Jung to join his team and subjugate this particular Orc. As an aside, when seven or more Knights gathered

together, it was referred to as a team.

It was a somewhat weird thing to see a team being formed to subjugate one Monster found in the Mid Tier hunting ground. But, the Dawn Order was actually encouraging the formation of teams comprised of low Mid Tier and Mid Tier Knights.

A normal hunting team would form around an upper Mid Tier Knight, usually. The purpose of this move by the management was to let the lower Tiered Knights gain some valuable experience in this manner.

Plus, they must have not been too worried, because the Orc, for some strange reason, had not killed any Knights or Hunters until now.

Of course, there was always an exception to the rule, but judging from the 100 or so victims of the Orc, the most serious injury suffered was some fractured ribs. So, one could safely concur that this Orc clearly wasn't planning to kill people.

An Orc that didn't want to kill. What a crazy idea that was, but then again, wasn't the very existence of Monsters shrouded in a veil of mystery?

""

Her arms crossed, Yu Sae-Jung agonised for a bit.

The Demon Orc. The creature's official record was 148 matches, 148 victories and o losses. It was a champion among champions.

So, if that Monster was successfully subjugated, then the achievements gained would be seriously enormous. And those achievements would directly influence her rank advancement exams for the Mid Tier.

After thinking for a bit, she abruptly pulled out her mobile phone.

Those who had the honour of having their numbers saved on her

phone were the likes of upper Mid Tier Knights, Wizards ranked B Class or higher, and high-ranking officials of politics and financial world.

There was only one Hunter among these giants, and that was Kim Sae-Jin.

"Please hold on for a moment. By the way, is there a spot for a Hunter to join?"

"Uh? Ah... Uhm, there isn't, but I'll make one!!"

When the guy proclaimed loudly, Yu Sae-Jung nodded her head and called that person.

If it was possible, she wanted to hunt together with that man. No, maybe, this was her making up an excuse or a justification because she wanted to see him again.

It had been over a month now since all contact with him had been lost. And she just failed to understand why she could not get a hold of him all of a sudden.

SFX for a ringtone

And as the ringtone continued to extend, Yu Sae-Jung began to bite her nails without even realising it.

She was feeling nervous. Why wasn't he picking up his phone?

- "The number you dialled is currently unavail...."

In the end, it was the same result.

"Ha-ahhhh..."

Sighing out grandly, Yu Sae-Jung pocketed her phone while carrying a hurtful expression. And then, turned her gaze back to the very hopeful male Knight waiting there.

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"...I'll do it."
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"OH!!"

At the surprise yes, the male Knight shouted out. As she was

feeling somewhat prickly at the moment, Yu Sae-Jung frowned sharply at him which caused the Knight to let out a fake cough in an apologetic expression.

"Keum. Thank you very much. Oh, and, uh... should we reserve the spot for that Hunter you mentioned?"

Sae-Jung powerlessly shook her head.

"No."

"That means..."

"Do as you wish. If possible, fill it with someone capable, please."

She coldly cut his words in the middle, and walked with heavy footsteps towards the training ground.

'Did I do... something wrong?'

Her chest began to tighten suddenly. Such a frustrated feeling was rather unfamiliar to her. She was someone who people fawned over her entire life, so why was she all hung up over a single person? She just could not figure this one out.

Was she afraid of losing the connection she had built with Kim Sae-Jin? No – that was just one of the reasons. There definitely was more.

"Fuuuu...."

The spiritless Yu Sae-Jung had arrived at the training ground before long.

Sighs automatically came out of her mouth.

Something was weird. Really, the training she looked forward to performing everyday was beginning to feel oh-so tedious now.

< 15. A Doubt, An Endeavor (3) > Fin.

Chapter 53: A Doubt, an Endeavor (4)

Nowadays, one got to see lots of hunting teams, made up of various Knights, coming and going within the Rest Stop of the Monster field. They all came here to achieve one singular goal.

And that goal was to subjugate the Demon Orc.

The Demon Orc – a Monster that became quite famous after appearing on SNS, community websites and news broadcasts.

It was now so famous, the mass media even went and gave it an utterly thoughtless name of a Monster Superstar. Of course, such a thing was only possible because the creature hadn't killed anyone yet and so the public didn't view it with hostility. No, they even gave it a favourable attention, instead.

"My name is Oh Dae-Soo, the leader of this subjugation team dispatched by the Daebaek Knights Order."

And that's why one could find many cameras and recording equipment in the Rest Stop. As a matter of fact, a hunting team was being interviewed right now by a news crew.

According to Oh Dae-Soo from the Daebaek Knights Order, he had fought against the Demon Orc in a desperate, bloody battle but regretfully, he had to taste defeat in the end.

"Perhaps, you've made preparations this time?"

"It's simple, really. I ended up losing unfortunately last time, but I will definitely defeat it this time."

"Ahhh. You're overflowing with confidence, aren't you? Then, may I ask what the composition of your hunting team is?"

When the reporter asked him about the touchy subject, Oh Dae-Soo's lips quivered slightly as he hesitated with his answers, until he finally replied in an unwilling tone.

"...We have four Mid Tier Knights and three low Mid Tiers."

"Uh.... Well, that's more than expected? You said that there was only a tiny little difference between you and the Orc, so why is there a need for so many Knights...?"

"Uh-huh. At that time, things were different. When I confronted it back then, it was not covered in strange scales, you see. The change most likely came about after experiencing the intense battle against me, which in turn helped it to grow further..."

Oh Dae-Soo strung a bunch of utter drivel with a dignified face. However, being a professional, the reporter tried to listen till the end. That lasted only until the team for the Dawn Knights Order entered the building, of course.

"As expected, even Monsters know how to discern great opponents and..."

"Yes, thanks for your time!! It was nice to hear from you!!"

The reporter hurriedly turned on his heels and rushed over there.

"What the hell, how rude..."

Oh Dae-Soo glared at the back of the departing reporter with a deep frown. But, almost right away, his face colour changed to a lively hue and he too ran over there as soon as he saw the identity of the person the reporter went to speak to.

Oh Dae-Soo being one of the moderators in Yu Sae-Jung's online fan club was an open secret among all the Knights Orders out there.

*

Receiving much attention from the filming crews, Yu Sae-Jung and her team of Knights set foot on the Monster field and headed straight towards the Mid Tier hunting ground – to find the traces of their target, the Demon Orc.

Her current ranking was only at the 'low Mid' Tier but, her

abilities were better than a regular Mid Tier so, no one in her team, including herself, was worried at all.

The 'Demon' Orc's fame might be pretty big now, but in truth, that was earned simply by beating up the Knights from the Orders that were nothing to write home about in the first place. The Dawn Knights Order was a different kettle of fish altogether – they would not be a pushover like the others.

Also, what could possibly happen to this team, comprised of three Mid Tier Knights and another three low Mid Tiers?

Thus, the team members were not worried at all.

"...Hahaha. Today's weather is pretty good, isn't it?"

And so, to the Knights in this hunting team, the goal of subjugating the Demon Orc could be seen as just a means to an end. Their main objective now was to get friendly with the most important person present and build connections with her.

Obviously, who would give a toss about some random Orc when there was the personification of the golden spoon right next to them?

"Seems like it."

However, Yu Sae-Jung continued to give out short answers to the endless stream of questions.

Even then, these five Knights did not give up. They worked very hard to talk to her even for one more second. And it so happened that there was no woman in this hunting team; within the heads of these males, dreams of definitely-impossible romance were being played out.

Thankfully, such pink-infused daydreams didn't last for long.

Khwang!!

From somewhere unknown, a faint sound of explosion could be heard. That could have been... the sound of impact from a blunt

weapon. The faces of Knights hardened in an instant and they glanced at each other. There was no need for a lengthy hesitation, though.

Because, Yu Sae-Jung dashed towards the direction of the sound like the tempest winds.

*

Sae-Jin wiped the blood splashed onto his face. His opponent this time was a juvenile Ogre. Although it was supposedly a juvenile, it was still a gigantic Monster with height easily exceeding 5 metres.

At the moment, it was nothing more than a pile of meat near his feet, though.

[Trait has leveled up.]

[All Stats will rise.]

It took about another two weeks for his Trait level to rise up to 13. Maybe it was due to receiving lots more experience points from defeating both the Monsters as well Knights, his level-up came pretty early, but he didn't feel any particular joy from it.

The most important thing right now was his evolution. He couldn't feel relieved at all until, at minimum, the Orc Form evolved into the Great Warrior.

"...!!"

Sae-Jin abruptly sensed the presence of a human running towards him like a beam of light. And there were more than one.

'Another hunting team?!'

From what he could sense, it seemed like yet another team of Knights. This was the third time this week already.

He found it all so annoying since most of these guys were equipped with artifacts that erased smell and made it hard to detect their presence. Of course, if he wanted to run away, then he could activate the 'Whirlwind Dash' at any time, but... he wasn't going to, when a fight was delivering itself to him like that.

Kim Sae-Jin held his mace tightly and waited for the Knights' arrival.

And precisely ten seconds later.

"Fuu."

The Knight revealing herself from the thicket was someone he was all too familiar with: Yu Sae-Jung.

At this unexpected encounter, Sae-Jin panicked a little. And during that short opening, the rest of the team arrived as well.

"Wow... So, the stories were true."

One of the Knights looked at the Orc in front and muttered. The creature was indeed an incredible existence, now that he saw it with his own two eyes.

Especially so, when looking at the majestic appearance of the Orc standing there resolutely with the blazing sun on its back.

The bright lights reflected off the Demon Orc's trademark azure scales; the imposing muscles on its body quivered, full of life; its dignified appearance would perfectly suit an Orc Chieftain – no, the Orc Great Chieftain, instead.

"Gulp."

One or two Knights present subconsciously swallowed their saliva and tensed up at the Monster's humongous frame emanating an unidentifiable noble aura.

Except for one person, that was.

"Let's go!!"

Yu Sae-Jung shouted out aloud and kicked the ground hard as she dashed forward.

The other Knights only then shook out of the momentary stupor and hurriedly chased after her.

"Heup!!"

With a short shout subconsciously leaking out from between the opening of her clenched teeth, Yu Sae-Jung threw everything she had behind her sword strike. Her oblique sword swing left behind the traces of Mana in the air as it approached the Orc.

However, her target – Kim Sae-Jin – did not even try to block her attack, nor did he move to dodge it.

He wanted to give her an inch and then, take the yard from her. First of all, in a battle against a group of opponents, making them no longer able to participate in combat as quickly as possible should take the utmost priority. He would cancel out this trifling attack with his own body and then go after her proper.

"...Sorry."

He felt apologetic towards Yu Sae-Jung, but it couldn't be helped. It'd be a struggle even for him to take on a team of six Knights all alone. He'd like to refuse taking part in a cliched event where he messed around unnecessarily and then ended up finding himself in danger.

From the beginning, he had no desire to kill them, but since they were attacking him with an intent to subjugate him, wasn't there a clear difference in opinion here?

Also, importantly... if one was to assign blame here, then there was Yu Sae-Jung who was rushing towards him like a rash idiot.

"Khowarrr!!!"

The Orc roared out loudly and slammed his mace against Yu Sae-Jung's waist. This wasn't one of his regular attack but actually, his 'Fierce Strike' after adjusting its overall power.

"Kkhuek!!"

The Mana barrier surrounding her shattered rather powerlessly, and leaving behind a short yelp, she bounced away like a kicked barrel.

SFX for a body ragdoll-ing around loudly

Her body bounced around endlessly until it struck a sturdy tree's trunk and only then did it come to a stop. There was not a single hint of movement from her. She was definitely out for the count here.

Sae-Jin could now easily decipher mistakes or openings in the enemy's offense after his passive Weapon User, which allowed him to wield weapons efficiently, rose up to level B. And what happened to Yu Sae-Jung was the result of her foolishly rushing into the mace's effective attack range.

She probably meant to get the first surprise attack in and do some serious damage.

Actually, her attack was scarily powerful. Since she also possessed a similar level-up system as he did, there might have been some sort of a skill involved here.

No, it was definitely a skill, alright. Kim Sae-Jin looked down on the stab wound left behind on the chest scales, and he chuckled wryly.

But such carefree attitude was a luxury he couldn't afford yet. There were still five more Knights left.

"Miss Sae-Jung!!"

He set his sights next on the Knight who had called out Sae-Jung's name as if he had a lot of leeway here. He must have thought the current situation was nothing but a play time or something... For such a clueless guy like him, a course in stern education was a necessity.

Sae-Jin avoided the attacks from other Knights narrowly and slammed his mace down on the back of that guy trying to run after

Yu Sae-Jung.

"Eu-ark!!!"

The Knight showing his back let out a short cry before collapsing in a heap.

There was only one attribute added to this mace: 'Enhanced Striking Power', level B.

With such a stupidly incomprehensible level of power endowed to this weapon, it'd be way too greedy for anyone to hope to remain conscious after getting struck on the backside with this mace.

And so, Sae-Jin got to easily thin out their ranks by two Knights.

But the real fight would begin in earnest from now on.

Maybe it was because of the two prior attacks, the remaining four Knights did not show any gaps in their defenses. By working together, they covered each other's openings and confronted the Orc.

At their remarkable coordination, Sae-Jin was slowly being pushed back, step by step.

Well, actually – he was allowing them to attack him freely. It was just that, their attacks were weak and could not penetrate the Leviathan's scales at all.

The Knights also understood this; so, they began concentrating their attacks on his chest where the scales were slightly damaged due to Yu Sae-Jung's earlier attempt.

However, even under such a concentrated barrage, Kim Sae-Jin was not flustered at all.

There was still one more ace up his sleeve, after all. Although the duration was only for five minutes, he could become twice as strong by activating the skill, the 'Warrior of Reversal'.

Of course, if he used that then the rest of the day's hunting plans

have to be thrown out the window, as his energy would be all used up... But to fight against these four very well-coordinated Knights, it just couldn't be helped anymore.

"Just a little bit more!! We're almost..."

One Knight sensed hope from their advantageous position.

As he said, just a little bit more; if they endured a little bit more, then surely, the victory would be theirs.

But that was only until the ominous aura began emanating from the body of this Orc.

"...What the?!"

"Don't stop attacking it!!"

The Knights continued to attack while trying to disregard the ominous feeling. Stopping their attacks when the going was good – that was something only trashy idiots would do.

...The guy who was trying to look after Yu Sae-Jung from the getgo and then got owned was one such trash, though.

However, the Orc's movement changed. Maybe, that unidentifiable red aura oozing out of its body and its eyes were to blame; the Orc's movements became far nimbler and its power became ridiculously stronger, too.

Wheee~ing

The wind pressure from the mace splitting the air shattered apart a large tree; and even though it was just a slight tickle on his thigh, a Knight felt an incredible pain akin to the nerves in his leg being severed.

"F*ck!!"

In the end, the Knights could only swear out loudly. Before they knew it, the flow of the battle had reversed completely, and they became busy just trying to defend. Unfortunately, even the defending bit couldn't last for long.

SFX for a loud Orcish roar

In that moment, when the Orc roared out angrily and slammed his mace down on the ground, the earth's crust itself shot up into the air. And that wasn't all. The shock wave from that dreadful smash got transmitted in full to the Knights within the range.

The pain they felt was similar to having their limbs trampled on.

"Euk!"

"Kheuk?!"

The space left behind in the wake of the vicious assault looked terrifying. The once-level ground had become a deep crater, and the Knights tumbling within couldn't even lift a finger as pain wracked their bodies. Heck, two of them had already fainted from the impact, even.

To these guys, this was the first time experiencing such immense pain as well as the fear of death. Quite unlike the Hunters and the regular soldiers, the Knights were seen as the high-class manpower of humanity and thus, were treated with utmost care and respect.

Which led to them having a completely different mindset to that of Hunters who had to bet their lives each time they hunted – after all, a Knight only saw Monsters as an easy source of wealth and saw the process of hunting as a simple 'labour'.

So, a Knight only got to get familiar with cutting and killing living things as if they were slaughtering livestock, but rarely did they find a chance to sharpen their resolves to face their own death.

And that's why it was not a coincidence that one of the assessments for the rank advancement to upper Mid Tier – where one could be called a true Knight – included the so-called 'proper mindset' as well.

66 25

Kim Sae-Jin walked towards them with thudding footsteps and looked down at the defeated Knights. Orcs loved this feeling of being the sole victor. And that was one of the reasons why looking down on losers like this was impor...

"Hey, you!!"

Right then. Sae-Jin heard a familiar voice and he turned his head to check it out.

Yu Sae-Jung was standing over yonder after regaining her consciousness somehow.

"Listen!! Take the three unconscious Knights and escape from here!!"

While pointing her sword at Sae-Jin's Orc Form, she shouted at the Knights still groaning in pain inside the crater.

And sure enough, commotion broke out from there. The things they said – how can we leave you behind, etc, etc... Well, they were what one would expect under this kind of circumstance.

"In any case, this Orc supposedly doesn't kill people!"

But right now, she could not be certain of this fact as it were, precisely because of the ominous aura still oozing from the Orc.

"But..."

"Will you just hurry up?! I have my own plan that I want to try out, so just get the hell out of here, now!!"

"...What the heck is wrong with this girl?!"

It was Sae-Jin who was in slight turmoil after seeing Yu Sae-Jung's determination.

However, the current appearance of her was busy overlapping with another one from the recent past within his mind.

Back then, when she was confronting the Troll in the Ravenous

State. While she was facing up to the Monster all alone, she was busy urging him to scram.

"...It's known to not kill humans so stop stimulating it and let's just escape with us from here..."

"You were the ones who stimulated it anyways! Stop wasting time and go find some help, now!!"

Yu Sae-Jung shouted out again.

"...?"

The situation seemed slightly different this time. Back then, she was telling the others to run while having no clear plan of her own – but now, she had an ace up her sleeve, a sure-fire killer move.

Wuo-oong...

Winds picked up; the sword began vibrating and Mana began converging.

Her killer move, where the sword aura was being compressed in an incredibly high pressure.

Mana accumulating on her blade was so high in density and concentration, her sword was actually humming in tune with it. That was the skill that had transcended the Mana Blade, the 'Destruction Blade'.

It was a skill so difficult, even upper Mid Tier Knights struggled to control properly. And now, she was doing it.

The two still-conscious Knights then quickly shouldered the three fainted ones and moved away as soon as they saw what she was going to do. And well, a Knight was still a Knight, whether his arms or legs were broken. Their speed was actually faster than a regular person's full-tilt sprint.

When they were safely out of the potential strike zone, Yu Sae-Jung began to earnestly scrap together every bit of Mana still in her. Such a massive convergence of Mana was enough to make Sae-Jin nervous as well.

So, he threw the mace at her with some power.

His proficiency with this weapon was so high now, making it fly like a boomerang wasn't even a challenge to him anymore.

He used the greatest strategy to victory under the heavens, also known as "those who strike first, wins".

As she was gathering Mana with every ounce of her concentration, Yu Sae-Jung could not react in time at the sudden attack.

Khong.

"Kyahk!!"

And so, she got hit on the head with the thrown mace, then promptly passed out where she stood.

" "

That was, honestly speaking, an anti-climatic end.

'It's not enough just activating the skill. You should know how to use it properly first...'

As expected, her youthful naivete got exposed again. Growing up as a gold spoon, just what chance would she have to experience true hardship? She probably had become too conceited for her own good, and only ended up learning useless habits, such as acting recklessly and all that...

"Whew."

Sae-Jin searched the surroundings for signs of humans, and when he couldn't find one, he changed into the Human Form.

Then, he picked Yu Sae-Jung up on his back and started walking.

The help would've come with the passage of time, but... he couldn't leave her here like that.

'That's why you should have just run away. You truly are an idiot...'

He inwardly criticised the girl on his back.

But, there was a grin etched across his lips at the same time as well.

[Condition complete: Defeated five hunting teams.]

– When one more condition is successfully fulfilled, the Orc Jaguar Form will change into the 'Orc Great Warrior' Form. (1/4)

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"...Uh!! Mister Kim Sae-Jin!!"

The butler and the Chief Secretary of the Dawn household, Park Hyun-Oh was standing around waiting nervously for someone – before noticing the figure of two people walking closer. He hurriedly ran over there.

To be precise, it was one person walking, while giving a piggyback ride to the other person.

"It's been a while."

Chuckling slightly, Kim Sae-Jin greeted the harried Park Hyun-Oh and then handed over Yu Sae-Jung to the butler.

"Yes. It's truly been a while. But why haven't you contacted us? Our little Miss was..."

"Ah, since she's still suffering somewhat, shall we talk about that later on?"

"...Of course."

"I already administered a potion so you don't have to worry too much."

Park Hyun-Oh let out a sigh of relief after hearing Sae-Jin's words.

"Did this happen when trying to defeat the Demon Orc? I heard

that she was among the team of six Knights..." (Park Hyun-Oh)

"...The Demon Orc?! Uh... Well, that Orc must have been pretty strong, it seems. Or maybe, one or two Knights accompanying her must've been... inept."

Park Hyun-Oh proceeded to ask him lots more questions afterwards. Such as, how did Sae-Jin find Yu Sae-Jung, what had happened to the Demon Orc, etc, etc...

Sae-Jin made up the story where he coincidentally discovered the scene of the Knights fighting the Orc, and out of concern for Yu Sae-Jung's well-being, he stayed behind to witness the event – and then, when the chance rose, escaped with her in tow.

"Well then, we should get going. We are truly grateful for your help today."

"Well, yeah... Take care."

After seeing Yu Sae-Jung away safely, Sae-Jin headed back to his home. After all, it had been a while.

And that evening.

Stories regarding the injured Yu Sae-Jung, the Knights from the Dawn Order and the one responsible, the Demon Orc, caused an uproar. It dominated the real time most-searched results as well as many news broadcasts.

「Even the Dawn Order fails to subjugate the Demon Orc... Is it finally the turn of the Raven?」

「In the situation of complete defeat, Hunter Kim Sae-Jin rescues Yu Sae-Jung.」

「Again, the Demon Orc does not take a single life... the public instead welcomes the creature's continuous victory.」

The stories were all – mostly – like these.

< 15. A Doubt, An Endeavor (4) > Fin.

Chapter 54: A Blueprint of the Future (1)

Kim Sae-Jin returned home for now. His worries hadn't been addressed yet, as the Orc Form was still not powerful enough but there were just too many things he had been neglecting so far.

The Goblin, often referred to as one of the most prolific alchemists in recent times, hadn't produced a potion in over three weeks; the third Athany doll was yet to make an appearance in the world; and not to forget, the promise of 'two weapons per month' made by the Orc Blacksmith was in danger of being broken only after the second month.

Of course, he had already paid off all his debts to Hazeline by now. Even if he took it real easy and worked slowly, he'd still make enough moolah to live out the rest of his life in comfort... But Sae-Jin didn't want to stop advancing his life forward here.

This life he was living right now, this precious life, was something he worked hard to secure while living in that damp squalor of a cave for more than five months of his life – four months previously and one just now.

He was not going to miss the opportunities right in front, that would enable him to achieve all that he could only dream about back then.

"Yes. Please send someone over to come and fetch the potions. No, don't worry. Nothing much happened. Well, it's a... secret."

It sure had been a while since they talked, but he called Hazeline and told her to come and fetch the potions. While obviously being ecstatic, she proceeded to tell him about the worries expressed by the media, Knights and the public after the Goblin Alchemist seemingly having gone AWOL on them.

"Right. Talk to you later."

He talked to her for around five minutes and after finishing up

the call, he then went online. The website he connected to was the home page for his Society, The Monster.

Maybe it was because the site was created by the specialists hired by Yu Sae-Jung, it looked and operated as good as the top portal sites out there. However, most likely due to it being not well known, there had been only two visitors today, including himself.

To reinvigorate the website, he decided to write and upload something here.

The artisan, the ORK, is seeking new owners for his weapons, the 'Orc Series.'

- For a week, starting 9 AM this Sunday, interviews will commence on the premise of the Orc's Forge. The person conducting the interview will be the Society's Chairman, Kim Sae-Jin.
- Please prepare application forms with the same format as before, by writing everything truthfully.
 - The pricing will be discussed with the successful applicants.

As soon as he pressed enter on the keyboard to upload the public notice, his mobile phone vibrated. While leaving his gaze fixed on the monitor, he answered the call.

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"Hello?"
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- "…"

However, not one word came from the other side.

When he took a glance at the caller ID on the touchscreen, it showed 'Yu Sae-Jung'. He chuckled slightly.

"Why did you call me?"

- "...Oh, so you finally decide to answer your phone."

She replied only after he asked her again. Her voice was steeped in icy coldness.

- "My bad. There was a thing I had to take care of."
- "Well, I understand, really. And you don't have to apologise to that extent. Well, it was me who called you out of the blue anyway, so it's not like I'm feeling hurt or anything. I thought we were friends, but I guess Oppa thought differently, huh. I wonder why I felt like that. But it's nothing to worry about. So..."

Seeing how she continued to prattle on needlessly, he could definitely tell that she was sulking right now.

Sae-Jin could somehow imagine her face on the other side of the line. Her eyes deeply narrowed, her lips in a lengthy pout, all the while busy scratching her innocent fingernails.

"There's that, but how is your body feeling right now?"

- "...Eh? Oh, it's okay. By the way... is it true that you rescued me?"
 - "Yeah. By coincidence, I was hunting nearby."
- "What?! A Hunter was moving alone in a Mid Tier hunting ground?!"

It was then his conscience became prickly for a moment, but he just sighed out grandly and began speaking to her in an accusatory tone. In cases like these, it was better to be thick skinned, after all.

- "Oi. I noticed just now that you talk as if you think Hunters are trash or something?"
 - "Huh? Ah, that is, it's not..."

"What do you mean, it's not? Now that I think about it, when we met for the first time, you treated me like an insect when I told you I was a Hunter, right?"

- "Eh? Eh? No, no that's not it!! W, what are you saying, in, insect?! I never treated Oppa like a bug, you know?! Never, never... It's a misunderstanding, a misunderstanding!!"

They say one knows his or her sins the best. Remembering the

event in question, Yu Sae-Jung began spewing gibberish in an unbridled panic.

"Don't do it again. Treating people badly like that, it's not a good habit to have, you understand?"

He was telling the truth. He met countless number of people after jumping headlong into the frontlines of 'life' at a young age. And among them, the bastards he found most disgusting were those who judged others by positions and talents, and after deciding the others were beneath themselves, completely disparaged them.

- "....I understand."

She sounded a little bit sulky, but since it was her fault to begin with, she didn't try to retort back at him.

"Ah, right. Can I ask you for a favour?"

Since she called him first, Sae-Jin decided that, might as well, ask her for one favour.

- "Mm? A favour...? What is it?"
- "You do those SNS things, right?"
- "Pardon? Oh... yeah, I do social media. You want me to send you a friend request? What's your handle?"

"No, that's not it..."

He was slightly surprised. He honestly thought that she might stay away from such things....

"Right now, on our Society's home page, the Orc Blacksmith had left behind a notice, you see? I want you to spread the word."

- "Really?"

"You'll see when you log on. I'm counting on you."

He almost unconsciously hung up right then, but somehow, he was able to stop himself just in time.

- "...Fine. I got it."

"Okay, thanks."

And that's how the conversation between the two ended.

However, neither of them dropped the call first.

- "You're not gonna hang up?"

"Yeah. You should hang up first. If there's some other stuff you want to talk about, that's fine too."

- "...As if you had listened to other stuff I wanted to say before..."

Sae-Jin told her that he'd listen this time as he turned his attention back to the computer monitor.

Because he suddenly remembered the matter of the Athany doll.

So, he began typing again.

Looking for the new owner of Athany.

- All details will be decided after the interview has been conducted. The location of the interview is the company building of The Monster, 'the Elron Building', situated in the suburbs of Wonju, Gangwon Province.
- If you post your questions on the open noticeboard on this website, we'll contact you one at a time.
- "Well, it's fine. I don't have anything else to say anyway. I'm hanging up now. I can check the details in the home page, right?"

"Yeah. There should be two notices."

- "Alright. See you. Bye."

However, he didn't drop the call and waited. Even Yu Sae-Jung did the same.

- "Ohhhhhh~~?!"
- "...It's for real, now. Don't you test me."

She let out a short exclamation full of mischievous tone, said she was hanging up for real, and she finally did.

'When Sae-Jung advertises a lot on SNS, then... Hang on a second.'

Then, a thought suddenly popped into his head.

'Maybe I should also do that SNS thingy?'

He was at the sweet old age of 23. That was at the age when the desire to jump into society would be running rampantly. But, swept up in the stormy winds called the 'working hard to survive', he could never afford to enjoy such things up until now.

"...Keum."

He did a fake cough and called Yu Sae-Jung first this time.

*

21st March.

The United Nations' own Knights Order proclaimed the 1st Class Threat, the 'Annihilated', on the Southern part of the African continent.

When the 1st Class Threat classification was given, that meant the area had to be abandoned due to the high number of powerful Monsters, and the equipment as well as the personnel brought in to suppress the threat were simply not sufficient enough.

At least, they were successful in closing the Fissure with great difficulty, meaning 80% of the continent was protected. But the rest 20% became an inhospitable hellhole full of uber-strong Monsters that defied all classifications.

The focus of the world's media, including Korea, gathered around on this tragic event that had cost so many lives. The countless denizens of this planet mourned the loss of life as well.

Also, using this event as the clear evidence, several organizations began to urge the others to stop treating Fissures and Monsters as sources of income but as a real, tangible threat that could steal away many lives – and to change the mindset to become more

vigilant and less lackadaisical.

However.... maybe, the event taking place in a land so very far away didn't touch people's hearts as deeply as it should have. The blazing flames of grief weakened until nothing was left in less than a week, and the fickle attention of the public quickly moved onto another topic altogether.

Yu Sae-Jung's SNS post was the beginning. A week ago, she posted a comment regarding her Society, The Monster, for her over two-million-strong followers to read.

And the contents within were great enough to make people forget about the African Fissure incident – the third Athany doll as well as the 'Orc Series' armaments.

The moment her post went live, it gathered explosive amount of attention from the Knights as well as from the public; and the servers of The Monster could not handle the traffic inundating the home page which led to it crashing several times.

"...How long should I wait for?"

And right now, this place was in the middle of the Society causing all that ruckus. The Monster's own private building, on the top floor – fifth.

Kim Yu-Rin sighed at the unrelenting passage of time.

She had a lot of work piled up today, but... it wasn't like she could just run away from this important agenda with a flimsy excuse of attending to her own personal matters. It felt like her innards were burning up from all the nervousness.

'But there sure are lots of people here. Well... it's a ridiculously good item, so there's that.'

The reception was packed to the brim with numerous awaiting Knights. Not only the members from the local Knights Orders, but the people from the overseas Orders, and several Wizards were present as well.

Without a doubt, they came here for the mascot doll that had become famous the world over, the Athany.

The Knights Orders and Wizard Towers sent out purchase request forms to The Monster as if they were in a contest or something, after checking out the notice on the Society's webpage.

As there were way too many requests, Yu-Rin heard that only ten interviews would take place every day... so, judging by the sheer number of people present, it seemed like the big shots of each Order came here with their own entourage.

"...Should I have brought people of my own too, I wonder?"

Kim Yu-Rin felt a slight regret born out of loneliness gnawing at her, but she quickly shook head.

That guy Chae Young-Ho would have tried to weasel his way in if she hadn't declared her intentions to come here alone. So, this was actually better for her.

"Uh?! Aren't you Knight Kim Yu-Rin?"

As she sat there and continued to wait endlessly, out of the blue some guy walked up closer and tried to chat her up. In that moment, the focus of the surroundings gathered here.

"Ah... yes. Hello."

She did wear a hat and a mask since she wanted to avoid this kind of situation, but...

Yu-Rin felt uncomfortable about this, but out of common courtesy, took off her disguise and greeted the man.

Since it was quite likely that the Knights here were all some kind of big shots in their respective Orders, she had to maintain a certain amount of decorum. Also, the words of Chae Young-Ho when he accused her of inadvertently ignoring other Knights played in her mind, too.

"The Raven also came?"

"Hu-uh, how troublesome. They are so greedy... keu-mm."

However, the atmosphere of the place quickly turned strange. Inside this spacious reception area, eyes of every Knight present sharpened like knives and they began glaring at Kim Yu-Rin as if she was their mortal enemy.

She panicked slightly as her gaze fell on the Knight who had recognised her first.

Unfortunately, this guy carried an expression of utter satisfaction at this turn of events; smiling contently, he then deliberately spoke at the top of his voice.

"By the way, I thought the Raven Order possessed an Athany doll already... But well, I can sympathise. Having two would be better, after all. The title of the best Knights Order in South Korea should be safer this way as well, too. Honestly speaking, it's actually better for the Raven to acquire the doll instead of other Orders as far as the country's interests are concerned, am I right?"

Anyone could hear from the tone of his voice that he wanted to cause trouble for her here.

Feeling a bit of anger swell up inside her, she was about to speak her mind when the dude said some c**p like he was praying for her success and stuff, before disappearing to some other place.

"Hey, excuse m..."

With steam of anger rising from her head, she stood up abruptly from her seat, but her thoughts froze in their tracks when the whispers of the surroundings entered her ears.

"Uh-whew. Look how she came here all alone. As if she's afraid of sharing her achievements... Really, she's not the youngest Highest Tier in the history for nothing."

"She's a cold one, that one."

No names, no faces - she could only hear their voices.

Only then did Yu-Rin realise it. This place here had turned into a huge political arena. These individuals had even forgotten about keeping a cordial front just for a chance to acquire the doll of Athany...

Getting mentally struck by multiple blows of dissenting voices loaded with clear hostility, Yu-Rin crumbled back down on her seat.

She realised that she had no allies in this place.

And so, Kim Yu-Rin had to endure all the hostile glares and cold sarcasms of other Knights by herself alone.

*

"Well then. We'll be in your care, Mister Chairman!!"

"Please take care of us!!"

The vice Order Master of the Daebaek, Oh Jung-Hyuk and his son Oh Dae-Soo bent their backs in 90 degree angle.

On their sides, really thick documents and rolled-up papers could be seen.

Those were all the PR materials they prepared for this meeting.

The pair of father and son prepared an extensive presentation for the meeting with Kim Sae-Jin; such as, how the Daebaek would assist The Monster if they acquired the Athany doll, projections of real benefits for both, as well as strategies to appeal to his sensible side, etc.

Of course, Sae-Jin was well aware just how badly Knights Orders wished to acquire the doll, but such an unexpectedly fervent ardour still ended up giving him a case of migraine.

And his 'time' was running short, too...

"Ah, yes, well... There was no need to go that far... Still, thank you for coming. The results will be announced in two weeks' time."

Sae-Jin also felt slightly uncomfortable at the sight of two people who were obviously older than him be so mindful of their manners and end up looking unmanly in the process.

"Please, we'd be deeply satisfied if you think of us in the most favourable light. As we spoke to you earlier, our Knights Order can..."

Oh Jung-Hyuk did his utmost best to alert Sae-Jin to the benefits his Order could provided right up until the very end.

"...Whew."

After finishing up this interview, Sae-Jin took a short break. He jotted down what Oh Jung-Hyuk had said on a piece of paper, and then pulled out his phone.

"...Wow. Fifty thousand, already?"

It'd been only three days, but he already had 50k followers. As expected, the power of Yu Sae-Jung's word of mouth was considerable.

Well, her help here was nothing more than her becoming a follower but still, since she followed only one person – him – obviously the public had to pay attention to the latest change in her SNS profile.

- Should I send in the next appointment?

The voice of the temp employee from the Dawn Corporation entered his ear.

"Yes. Please do."

The door opened, and a single woman walked in with heavy footsteps.

It was someone Sae-Jin was familiar with - Kim Yu-Rin.

But her state seemed a bit peculiar. Her face was red; her normally neat hair was somewhat dishevelled; and there was a trace of blood on her lips as if she was biting on them too hard for too long.

She walked heavily while gritting her teeth, and sat opposite to Sae-Jin.

*

"...Will it work, dad?"

"Of course. You also saw that things went smoothly in there, right? And just how much money did we spend on Kim Sae-Jin's close aides? And I even gave out a little present to that manager Elf from the armoury, too... Kehuem. Let's talk about this later."

"The manager?"

At Oh Dae-Soo's confused question, Oh Jung-Hyuk looked at his son with disappointed eyes. The gaze contained the feelings of a father who felt sadness and pity for his son who was clueless on the ways of the real world.

"That Elf manager from the armoury. That woman who is being suspected as Kim Sae-Jin's main squeeze. How come you didn't... Hoo. Fine, fine. I shouldn't even have brought it up."

Oh Jung-Hyuk shook his head and stepped into the elevator first. Dae-Soo stared at his father with envious eyes and then, with a huge grin on his lips, followed Jung-Hyuk into the elevator as well.

"As always, I knew you could do it, dad. You became friendly in that short amount of time with the girlfriend of the Society's Chairman..."

"Calm down, son. I told you, it's still just a speculation. It's not a definite thing. Well, since Kim Sae-Jin is a man, he surely would have held one or two indecent thoughts about that Elf... by the way, why are you smiling so happily right now?"

Oh Jung-Hyuk grumbled and slapped the back of his son's head. Regardless, Oh Dae-Soo continued to stare at his father with clear, round eyes of adulation. Even though the boy was not all there up in his head, as a father, he just could not bring himself to hate his own child.

"Eiii, you b*****d. Didn't I tell you to lose some weight many times already?!"

Oh Jung-Hyuk poked the belly fat of his son while chuckling slightly.

< 16. A Blueprint of the Future (1) > Fin.

Chapter 55: A Blueprint of the Future (2)

"...Are you alright?"

Kim Sae-Jin carefully asked. But with a dark and clouded expression, Yu-Rin simply nodded her head weakly and grandly sighed out.

"This here is what the Raven Knights Order is considering as its proposal."

She handed him a bound copy of a report.

"Oh, ah... thanks."

Sae-Jin received the report and then took a quick glance at the contents.

Even though this was already his 5th interview today, in all honesty, most of what he was reading right now didn't want to enter his brain at all. The printed words were small, there were lots of numbers and calculations, and even some needless English words thrown in there, too...

Without a doubt, it was a typical report drawn up by civil servants working in the government-run Knights Order.

'I really need dedicated employees for this...'

He again reaffirmed his thoughts on hiring more specialised workers, even if it meant asking Yu Sae-Jung for it.

"Mm."

He closed the report while trying to look as if he had understood most of the contents within. However, Kim Yu-Rin's eyes busy studying him seemed a bit strange. She sighed out, not caring whether anyone could hear her or not, and then weakly muttered out in a disappointed voice.

"...You didn't even read that properly..."

"Eh? No, no, that's not correct. I have read it thoroughly."

Now feeling a bout of guilt, Sae-Jin hurriedly waved his hands in denial, but that only made Yu-Rin's eyes to droop down even more in sadness.

"...Mister Kim Sae-Jin."

"Y, yes?"

As if she had something to say, her lips moved slightly. However, the words she wanted to say didn't come out easily. She took her sweet time agonising over the matter, until finally, decided that this wasn't working. She shook her head and then tried to speak in a cheerful voice.

"I'd like to thank you for the gifts you gave me."

What she managed to utter out didn't suit the current situation at all.

That caused Sae-Jin to be flustered momentarily, but he tried to sound as unperturbed as humanly possible.

"Ah... Yes, it was my pleasure."

"That... the Athany doll you gave me that time and the dolls of now are different, right?"

"Eh? Ah... yes, that's correct. Their effects do differ, but the doll I gave to you is just as good an item as the others."

"As I thought. Whenever I go to bed, I have it near me and I've always felt something was special about it. As you said, it helps me to calm my mind, and... somehow, it's become a close friend I can't do without now."

"Ahaha... Well, that's a relief to hear."

And soon, the conversation that started with the discussion of private matters slowly led into the official business. However, their talk frequently got cut off for some reason and felt rather awkward and unnatural.

Yu-Rin deliberately tried to sound cheerful, but... she actually had a rather timid personality. The memories of ten missed calls and eight unchecked messages from her still weighed like a heavy baggage in her mind.

And not to forget, less than ten minutes ago, she was being mentally assaulted by the countless number of enemies, so it was not possible for her to maintain a 'normal' state of mind.

" "

In the end, their conversation came to a close and between them, silence descended like a fog.

As he had been a listener-only until now, Sae-Jin truly had no clue how to take the lead in a meeting like this and so, he began repeatedly thumbing through the poor pages of the report.

[1 hour, 30 minutes.]

While he was doing that, suddenly the alert window for 'time remaining' brushed past his consciousness. When he looked at Yu-Rin, she didn't seem to have anything particular to say. So, Sae-Jin carefully asked her.

"How about we end the meeting here?"

"...Uh? Ah..."

Yu-Rin's face became clouded in disappointment and her gaze dropped to the floor. Well, the truth was that, this meeting only started ten minutes ago. If one considered how other Knights Orders spend 20, 30 minutes per meeting, then there was a significant difference.

"Instead, how about I treat you to another meal later on? There are still things I'd like to discuss with you, after all."

Sae-Jin quickly smiled and spoke further after witnessing the dark complexion on her face.

"Eh? Oh. Sounds good. I happen to have next week Saturday free,

so..."

"Then it's settled. The same restaurant as the last time?"

"...Yes. That's fine."

"Great."

Sae-Jin reached out with his hand, and Yu-Rin shook it while carrying a slightly confused smile.

But then, thinking that she must convince him with this new opportunity, her face hardened as she shook his hand with added strength.

*

Nowadays, Kim Sae-Jin's daily life had become complicated. During the day's lunch time, he assumed the Human Form and went through a ton of piled up work. And precisely after four hours of doing that, he'd leave the office of the Society and head towards the Monster field to focus on his growth.

And always, while in the hunting area, he assumed the Orc Form – the Demon Orc. On the official Monster Bestiary, he was now known as the 'Orc Jaguar covered in pronium scales'.

This name came about because the scales of the skill 'Leviathan's Scales' covering the Orc's body resembled the blue-coloured metal, pronium.

Additionally, the images and stories of the Demon Orc had crossed the borders and permeated into international community chat sites, causing quite a bit of stir from all corners of the globe. Thanks to that, several international news agencies such as BBD, CNC etc., had come over to Korea and set up shop. Their reasoning was to film the unique and powerful Monster that could only be found in Korea.

"... I should be really careful when hunting from now on."

Sae-Jin sighed out while browsing the Dawn Knights Order's

exclusive app 'Dawn Page', which was only possible to do so after he borrowed Yu Sae-Jung's log-in ID.

From it, he found out that numerous Mid and upper Mid Tier Knights were forming hunting teams to subjugate the Demon Orc. The Dawn Order's Master got royally p*ssed off at the fact that his daughter got hospitalised and consequently, he placed a bounty of nearly \$2 million dollars on the Orc's head. So, how could anyone not participate in this hunt?

"Fuheung."

And that's why Kim Sae-Jin the Orc could only squat inside his cave for now. But he wasn't wasting his valuable time by doing nothing.

The Magic Tattoos.

He was in the middle of tattooing the entire body of the Orc.

'Not even a trace, huh.'

Kim Sae-Jin looked on at his completed Tattoos with satisfaction.

Since Orcs had no 'dexterity' whatsoever, the end results were rather crude but, the colour of the tattoos were the same as his skin so it was hard to spot them, and when he activated the Leviathan's Hard Body, the scales would cover up his entire body, meaning it didn't even matter anyways.

[With the absorption of a mid grade Element Resistance potion, a certain percentage of the element-based magic's effects will be resisted.]

[Depending on the power of the element-based magic used, the host can ignore the damage from spells ranked below D.]

The reason why Sae-Jin went and got himself these tattoos was – he got properly schooled by a certain Mid Tier Knight with a Trait called the Magic Swordsman. From this encounter, he learned that, while an Orc's body possessed a strong resistance towards

physical damage, it was found utterly hopeless against attacks containing 'magic'.

"Fuu."

Even though he was quite chuffed at the completed tattoos, he suddenly felt his chest tighten and ended up sighing out loudly.

'Just when can I become an Orc Great Warrior?'

As soon as his Orc Jaguar Form evolves into a Great Warrior after fulfilling that single remaining condition, the power balance within him should stabilise and that would give him a peace of mind – but, he just could not get a sniff on what that bloody condition might be.

'Well, nothing to gain by just sitting around...'

The Orc's expression turned sour as if he had stepped on dog poo, and unwillingly, he began to walk out of the cave.

*

Early in the following morning.

"An interview?"

- "Yeah. I just got a call from the Time magazine, saying they want to interview the members of our Society. I don't know why they contacted us first, but... what do you think, Oppa?"

Sae-Jin welcomed the morning call from Yu Sae-Jung.

"The Time magazine?! Aren't they, like, super famous or something?"

Even if he was a dirt-poor orphan growing up, he still managed to overhear a thing or two. And one of those things was the magazine Yu Sae-Jung had just mentioned.

- "Yep, it's them, alright. They are probably the world's best weekly publication out there? Anyways, one of the topics they are covering this week is the rising Societies, and that's why they want to interview us, apparently."

Yu Sae-Jung didn't even try to hide her happiness as she giggled loudly.

- "It sure will be totally weird and so funny if Oppa is selected as the Person of the Year or something."

She even started saying some unnecessary things as well.

"...That doesn't even make sense. But you do it if you want. I don't think I can make it."

Sae-Jin was filled with regret as he spoke his refusal. Even though he desperately wanted to do the interview, there just wasn't enough time as he had no idea how long it might take.

- "Excuse me?! But why? You're the Society's Chairman, so how can you be absent?! Huh, well then, what about Mister Goblin, Mister Orc or Miss Shenarine the Wizard?"

"Uh... Hmm. I don't think they will be available as well."

- "Ahhhh-aht!!"

Sae-Jin chuckled as her despairing cry came from the other side of the line. He also thought that before too long, he should let her know of the identity of both the Alchemist and the Blacksmith...

'I should just tell her straight one of these days.'

He thought that he had gotten pretty close to Yu Sae-Jung by now. It had been already nine months since he got to know her, and the girl who was a minor back then was already standing on the cusp of adulthood.

There had been a lot of eventful things happening since then. He appeared on TV together with her, went out on hunting together, and while hiding his identity, he even ended up smacking her around.

And so, she had become someone he could place his absolute trust in.

- "This, this, I'm just gonna say no. It's just... too much."
- "Uh? No, don't do that. It's a good opportunity to increase the visibility of our Society, after all."
 - "...Eh?"

"I know you want to do it. So, why not? Just don't forget to package other members nicely while you're at it."

As if she was completely speechless, Yu Sae-Jung couldn't even retort back.

"Oh, right. Besides that, can you find the employees I told you about?"

- "Yeah... huh? Oh, that? Yeah. Since we'll be getting people from the Dawn Corporation, you don't have to worry about their capabilities. The only problem is that, we have way too many applicants..."

"Ah, that's not an issue."

In the history of mankind, finding out a person's character through only his or her appearance alone was nearly an impossible task. There was a reason why many idioms such as honeyed tongue and two-faced, etc, etc, got invented, after all.

However, Sae-Jin actually possessed the ability to see past the outer appearances. And that was the skill now rated at B, the 'Eyes of the Wolf'. Thanks to the skill receiving lots of level up, he could now discern the 'character' of other people even when he was in the Human Form.

The methods of discernment was simple enough. After he turned up the sensitivity of his irides to the maximum, he then would look into the eyes of the others; their eye colour would change according to the innate nature of the person.

The polar opposites 'evil' and 'good' were coloured black and white respectively, and depending on which side the person's

colour was closer to, he'd then designate either 'dirty' or 'clean'.

This skill even made it possible to discern not only a person's true character but his or her relevant 'abilities' as well. He just had to take a look at the aura rising from their bodies. When the colour was closer to a brilliant golden hue, the person was an extraordinary individual, but when the colour was closer to being weak and feeble, then that person was... just a regular Joe.

Of course, the colour of his own eyes would change into a bright golden hue if he used this skill, but a pair of contact lenses would take care of that problem so he was not too bothered by that prospect.

"I will take care of that problem. Just round them up in one place, and I'll need only five minutes to browse through them in one go. How many applied?"

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- "270."
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"Yep, it's fin... What?! 270?!"

Now that was an unexpected number.

Why were there so many applicants? Sae-Jin failed to understand why 270 folks were willing to abandon their positions in one of the most prestigious companies in the world for a spot in a Society rated a measly C-...

"Why the hell are there so many people?!"

- "The outlook of our Society is really positive, so there's that, but... most importantly, it's because you, Oppa, put up way too good employment conditions, you know?I mean, who promises a monthly wage of \$5500 dollars after tax?! You even promised excellent welfare benefits..."

"No, that's, well... You shouldn't be stingy when investing in people, you know."

He acted like this because of a certain resentment rooted in his

heart.

A human being needed to be treated as a human being.

He got to learn this maxim the hard way at a young age while enduring against scorn, abuse, ridicule as well as ignorance.

- "Okay, then... The plan is to have them gather in the Society's building this Friday, so Oppa, please take care of it."
- "Right. Then you do the interview. And if it's at all possible, speak nicely about me, okay?"
- "Heu-eumm... Yes, well. Since our great Society Chairman decreed so, I must totally submit to it, then. After all, that is the condition to join our Society, right?"

Her unexpected and loaded insinuations went straight for his jugular.

- "...Hey, you. Where did you hear that?"
- "What do you mean, where. Everyone's heard of it by now. The conditions for joining our Society are 'complete submission' and 'can not join any other Society' isn't that right?"

"Keum. The former is incorrect, but as for the latter, we should do exactly that. I hate bats."

He said those words mischievously back then... but now, they had somehow become the official joining criteria. Suddenly, he recalled the mug of Kim In-Soo. Did that fool spread the rumour?

- "But I hear there are still lots of people wishing to join us? Ah, right! Is it true that the upper Mid Tier Knight Joo Ji-Hyuk will be joining us? Everyone's been talking about it, you see. It's all been hectic inside our Order, too. Other Knights are going crazy with jealousy, saying Joo Ji-Hyuk is now moving up in the world and stuff."
- "Ah, Mister Ji-Hyuk? I thought he's a good-hearted and diligent guy."

Since it was a Society not just in name only, obviously the member count couldn't remain at three forever. That was why he had set his eyes on Joo Ji-Hyuk for some time now. And when Sae-Jin indirectly raised the matter with the dude, Joo Ji-Hyuk's expressions were like he'd die from happiness just thinking about it.

"I already received his application papers. I'm going to admit him in tomorrow."

- "It's all good. He is a really dependable guy, after all. Hmm... Then maybe I should eat out together with Mister Ji-Hyuk tomorrow~?"

Yu Sae-Jung's voice seemed to suggest something as the ends of her sentence blurred somewhat. Maybe, she was trying to incite something like jealousy from Sae-Jin...

"Oh. That's a good idea. The fellow Society members should have a cordial relationship with one another, after all."

But Kim Sae-Jin was 'disinterested' personified – which caused her to sigh out deeply and then, abruptly hang up the phone first.

"...What's her problem?"

As the call had come to a sudden end, he just pocketed his phone and he stretched his limbs grandly.

Today was the beginning of the weekend. For him, it was the beginning of the busiest day of them all.

Onwards, to the Monster field.

*

An Orc and an Ogre was having a contest of raw strength. Now normally, the Ogre would flatten an Orc Jaguar into a sheet of A4sized paper with a single punch. That's the common sense, regardless of where one was from, be that a hunting ground or a plane of existence.

SFX for the Orc's loud roar

But the current status of this battle was going the other way.

The mace swung with all the might this Orc could muster didn't simply stop at destroying the wooden club wielded by the Ogre, it even shredded a part of the Ogre's arm. It was truly a display of terrifying power.

SFX for an Ogre groaning

After losing one of its arms and its trusty weapon, the Ogre seemed to have lost its balance and slowly fell down.

One wouldn't have to do anything to achieve victory in this case, but Orcs were an impatient bunch. With light reflecting off its blue scales covering its body, the Orc jumped in the air and smashed the Ogre's face in with the mace.

Kwaaaahang!!

The shock waves coming off from the impact swept past the trees; and so, that's how this particular Ogre left this world.

After finishing up the fight, the Orc then turned its attention back towards the peanut gallery that shouldn't even be there in the first place.

"Wow."

"Ohhhh."

Clap, clap.

Out of the four people standing over there, two of them must have lost their marbles because they were busy clapping their hands in delight.

Kim Sae-Jin glared at them while his expression reflected how absurd this situation was.

And that situation was thus: about 20 minutes ago, as he was

roaming around the low Mid Tier hunting ground, Sae-Jin ran into an adult Ogre, a creature that shouldn't have been there. Even though it lacked any distinguishing features such as patterns or horns, an adult Ogre was still a Monster ranked upper Mid Tier that should have been found only at upper Mid Tier hunting ground.

The Ogre that seemingly had appeared out of nowhere was busy chasing after this party of people. Kim Sae-Jin didn't even hesitate for a second before activating the Warrior of Reversal skill and took on the Ogre head on.

"Shouldn't we run now?"

"No, it's okay. That Orc doesn't kill people."

"No, no, I know that. But, although it might not kill, it still hurts you pretty badly, right?"

"....Oh, I forgot about that."

Fortunately, one of the group, a Soo-in, with her ears trembling in fear, seemed to be in the right frame of mind.

"Okay, hang on a sec. Lemme take a quick selfie here..."

However, instead of realising the error of her ways, a woman – possibly a Knight – decided to do something even more stupid. Finding this rather ridiculous, Sae-Jin began moving his feet slowly towards this woman.

"...I got it!! Let's run!!"

That female Knight actually waited until the Orc could be seen better within the camera screen before snapping the image – and as soon as that was done, she ran off real fast as if her feet were on fire.

"...Really, the world is vast and there truly are one too many crazy idiots out there."

While recalling the famous line from somewhere, Sae-Jin

approached the dead Ogre and pulled out the Mana Stone from the creature's still heart.

A Mana Stone from an adult Ogre. If he used this as the base ingredient for his tattoos, then without a doubt, he should receive a tremendous boost to his overall power.

Just thinking about receiving the power of an Ogre... made the Demon Orc really happy.

"Khrrng?"

However, Sae-Jin discovered a certain something attached to the dead Monster's thigh.

When he took a closer look... it was an egg.

It was an egg with a sticky surface that helped it to effortlessly stick onto just about anything. And as far as Sae-Jin's knowledge base went, he knew only one Monster's egg that could do this.

< 16. A Blueprint of a Future (2) >Fin.

Chapter 56: A Blueprint of the Future (3)

The Griffin – a strange Monster possessing the head and wings of a hawk, a body like that of a lion, and its front limbs resembling that of a hawk. Griffins that ruled the skies of Mid Tier hunting ground was rather well known to the public thanks to its dignified appearance.

And there was one more thing. The surfaces of the Griffin eggs were strangely sticky which allowed them to cling onto pretty much anything; Hunters and Knights hunting in this region could find these eggs, albeit on very rare occasions.

'Did it get picked up by that Ogre when it was walking around?'

Sae-Jin the Orc walked towards the Griffin egg in thudding footsteps and picked it up. The unique liquid felt icky in his fingertips.

'Should I eat this now?'

He scanned all over the egg while drooling slightly. From the words of those people who had coincidentally discovered the eggs, a Griffin egg tasted absolutely heavenly.

Besides, the creature inside this egg was a Monster that would definitely become a headache for the humanity. After all, because of its nature and instincts, not even a newborn could be tamed by human hands, which made it reasonable why they were referred to as Monsters in this regard alone.

"Kheung."

And so, as he was thinking about whether to fry or boil the egg, like literally out of nowhere, an alert window filled with the list of Passive Skills he possessed rose up to his view.

- ► The Passive Skill 'Predator' [Skill Proficiency Level: C-]
- The host will grow stronger the more enemies the host

eliminates.

- The prey can feel fear towards the Predator and could surrender/wish to submit under the rule of the host.

There was a skill exactly for a situation like this; a Passive Skill he happened to acquire when he became the Werewolf, one that could be utilised during all of his Forms.

Since there was no literal prey-predator relationship between humans, the skill didn't apply, but right now, it was very much applicable. Honestly, wasn't he thinking about making a sunnyside-up fry out of this egg only 30 seconds ago?

"...Kherueng."

When he imagined a scene of an Orc – maybe, even a person – riding on a Griffin... now that was seriously cool.

He let out a fake cough for some reason, and then placed the Griffin egg inside the Expanding Pocket.

*

It was the following week's Friday – also the day the employees for the Society, The Monster would be picked.

Kim Sae-Jin spent nearly an hour finishing up the interviews.

The first thing he looked for was the 'abilities' and so, he picked those with rich golden auras from the gathered people. The number of hopefuls decreased from 270 to mere 30 that way; and afterwards, he performed a personal, face-to-face meeting with each individual to check out their real nature respectively.

Evil guys were ones to avoid, but at the same time, real goodytwo-shoes were no good, either.

However, after finding out that 27 applicants' eyes were dyed in black, Sae-Jin had little choice but to hire the remaining three with purest colours there could be.

Now that he looked at the process, it somehow had become one

with a horrible failure rate of 90:1, but Sae-Jin felt satisfied in the belief that he ended up hiring good people.

"Welcome to the team," said Kim Sae-Jin, while looking at the group of one woman and two men in front of him.

"My name is Kim Sae-Jin, the Society Chairman."

""It's our honour!!""

All three replied with full of energy.

"Please, introduce yourselves. From the left... Miss Soh Jin-Hui first."

"Ah, yes. Yep! M, my name is Soh Jin-Hui, and I worked for t, two years as a gopher in the planning department of Dawn Electronicssssss!!!!"

Soh Jin-Hui was a cute-ish young woman with freckles on her cheeks. Her replies sounded quite strained as she was tightly wound up with lots of nerves.

However, Sae-Jin tilted his head in slight confusion. The golden aura coming off her was the strongest of the three here, so why did she spend two years as a gopher...?

"My name is Jo Hahn-Sung, and I also hail from Dawn Electronics, this time as a deputy in the marketing department."

Next up, was a guy with a sturdy physique, Jo Hahn-Sung.

This time too, things were just as puzzling. He seemed to possess good abilities, and he was certainly not a young rookie anymore, so why only a deputy? Sae-Jin and his lack of knowledge base still knew that a deputy in a department was not a high position.

"My name is Yu Dohng. I used to work as a general manager in the financial department of the Dawn Trading Company... but was waiting for the right time to do that voluntary resignation thing. Haha... But I ended up receiving another opportunity like this. I'm truly grateful. Thank you." (TL: voluntary resignation – "思写"

resigning before the official retirement age.)

The middle-aged man with an unusual name smiled honestly while scratching the back of his neck.

Now that he heard their introductions, a weird feeling was taking root in Sae-Jin's heart.

Within the ranks of the Dawn Corporation, there were plenty of appealing people possessing good abilities, wonderful education, as well as lots of achievements.

However, he now heard that these three people with good personalities had to either waste away as a low-level employee or await for retirement. Was it because their colleagues were wary of them? Or did they get exploited by their superiors or colleagues who belittled them for their good hearts?

"...Well, thank you for your introductions. From now on, all three of you will start working as the Chiefs of your respective departments."

Whatever their life stories were like until now, Sae-Jin had no plans to treat these people who were overflowing with abilities and potential badly at all.

"...Eh?"

"Uh?"

At Sae-Jin's sudden declaration, the faces of the three rapidly underwent changes. Their eyes widened, and their jaws hit the floor.

The faces of utter shock – they had never in million years dreamed of starting their new jobs from such a high position as a Chief of a department, just like that. Especially for the Society, The Monster, that was busy distinguishing itself in the various spotlights of the social media, news articles, etc, etc...

"No need to be that surprised, you know. There are only three

employees, and only three departments, so it's natural that you guys become the department heads."

While speaking like this, Sae-Jin picked up a thick pile of documents resting on the floor and placed the stack on the desk with a big thud. Not just once, either – thud, thud, thud... A total of four stacks.

The shock from the sudden promotion to the position of department Chiefs lasted for only a brief moment. The new employees gulped big time at the fearsome amount of work making its entrance.

"This stack here is for the Athany doll... This here is for all the partnership requests from various Wizard Towers... And this here is for... uh, the Society member's application forms? Ah, don't worry about this stack, we can just burn them all."

Fortunately, from all the potential misery, one of the huge pile of documents sank back beneath the desk.

"The final one should be... details of financial transactions regarding the potions and armaments crafted by the Society's members. Well, then. Please take these stacks accordingly to your specialties and do your best."

Kim Sae-Jin clapped his hands loudly. As soon as he did that, the temp employees he 'borrowed' from the Orc's Forge entered the office of the Chairman.

"They will show you to your individual offices. Oh, and when you're done... well, please compile reports containing summaries of this and that, and I'd appreciate it if they are short and easy to read. Also, if you need more helping hands, please use your discretion and bring some others in. I'll take a look and if they are capable, then I'll insert them in right away. You know, like parachutes?" (TL: Hmm. The term "parachutes" isn't literal parachuting off the plane or anything, but more like hiring a person and placing them in important positions based solely on the

whims of the guys doing the hiring – in most cases, you could accuse them of nepotism, as that's the most prevalent example of "parachuting.")

When Kim Sae-Jin smiled brightly at the three, the new employees could only nod their heads in a daze.

*

Another week went by after that. And the owners of the third Athany doll was finally decided upon.

The conditions given by the Dawn was the best, and the prestige of the Raven was the highest, but in all honesty, having those two dominate all the time was just a bit uncool, so Sae-Jin chose the Daebaek Knights Order instead. Actually, the government also requested him to do so as well.

The reasons were, the Vice Order Master, Oh Jung-Hyuk and his son Oh Dae-Soo pleading with him so ardently, and their offer was only slightly worse than that from the Dawn Order.

When this decision was made public, the real time search results became full of nothing but the stories of The Monster, Daebaek Knights Order as well as the doll of Athany.

The rumour floating around in the grapevine was that, on the day of the announcement, all the Knights and Hunters affiliated with the Daebaek Order gathered together in celebration and enjoyed a victorious feast or some such.

Additionally, the plan was for the Athany doll to be escorted by platoons of Knights and an official state vehicle sent by the Daebaek Order to its headquarters two days later.

'Just when will it hatch, though?'

However... currently, the man responsible for making all that ruckus on the internet was feeling very impatient at a single egg.

He heard that Griffins hatched quickly to ensure their survival,

but it had already been over a week since he brought the egg home. Worrying that either the chick had died inside the egg, or maybe it could be an unfertilised egg instead, the deeply worried Kim Sae-Jin in his Goblin Form busy roamed around his home without taking a break.

SFX for an egg vibrating

Right then – an imperceptible tremor occurred from the egg sitting inside the incubator.

Immediately, Sae-Jin ran over to the machine and knelt before it.

Suddenly, a new worry came crashing down on him. Just which Form should he use to greet this little guy: the Orc, the Human, or the Goblin?

Unfortunately, there wasn't much time for indecisions.

The egg that was only trembling softly just now, suddenly shot up and started bouncing around madly.

"...Ahwoo.."

In the end, Sae-Jin assumed the Human Form and approached the egg.

Right on cue, the egg split apart and a small, cute lifeform emerged into the world with weak cries of ppiyak, ppiyak.

""

Sae-Jin forgot what he wanted to say in that moment. Didn't matter whether it was a human or an animal, the newborns were the cutest. This little creature who hadn't even opened its eyes yet was seriously just so dang lovable.

"Ppiyak-Ppiyak- Ppayakk-Ppaaaekkk- Ppaeaeaekkkk- PPAEEEEKKK!!!"

However, the reality was, no matter how cute the thing looked, it still was an offspring of a Monster. From its tiny beak, a thunderous roar exploded out in a hurry.

Only then, Sae-Jin could recover his sense from the dazed state caused by its cute exterior and he began actively using the skill 'Predator'.

He began stroking the head of the baby Griffin while sending his own thoughts of absolute obedience and submission towards the creature, such as, "I am your owner."

"PPAAEEee... Ppiyak-Ppiyak..."

Soon, the thundering roars quietened down until it was no more louder than some vigorous breathing.

This was the scene where, for the first time ever in written history, a human being had succeeded in taming a Monster, and a Griffin turning into a... sort of a pet.

"...So cute."

Sae-Jin murmured in daze as he continued to stroke its head. Its smooth fur and the tender skin felt so wonderfully soft.

The baby Griffin hadn't fully opened its eyes yet but it still turned its head towards the hand that was touching it and began poking its tongue out. And then began licking his hand.

Sae-Jin gazed down on the creature with a fatherly smile.

"...Ah!!"

However, there was still one more thing he had to do. The owner of the Griffin wasn't just Sae-Jin in the Human Form.

He changed into the Orc and then the Goblin Form, one at a time, to make sure the Griffin would recognise them. Thankfully, the baby Griffin was ignorant of the ways of this world and was able to accept everything without a fuss.

"...Hmm."

And some time passed by like that. Sae-Jin changed back to his Human Form and activated the Eyes of the Wolf. He was kind of curious about this creature's potential.

'Ah... That's too bad.'

Unfortunately, the aura coming out of the Griffin was as unremarkable as one could possibly get.

"...But, it's still fine."

It didn't really matter, though. When it grows up all healthy, then he'd make it into the strongest Griffin in the world with a few well-placed Magic Tattoos.

*

The time flowed by like the running water; and the eventual arrival of the Spring's winds warmly embraced the naked trees, finally awaking them into the beginning of a new cycle of life.

During this time period, many issues regarding Kim Sae-Jin and his Society, The Monster, rose and fell.

First of all, the Orc Blacksmith revealed two new weapons. One of them was rated 5th Rank Branded Goods which ended up causing a sizeable shock. The Branded Goods ranking was divided into five sub categories, and the closer an item got towards the 1st Rank, the better its quality was.

However, there had been an equally big backlash during the process of unveiling this weapon as well. The reason was that, the Orc ended up selling that Branded Goods to a foreigner.

The person who purchased the Orc's weapon was a Knight affiliated with the Knights Order ranked one of the top five in North America, Veritas Order's Vice Master, Angela.

The deal was successful only because the Vice Order Master personally visited the Orc's Forge, and also the fact that her serious and dignified request was spoken in Korean. However, the Korean Knights Orders and the mass media tore into these facts like a pack of feral, crazy bi*ches.

Slanderous rumours spread around uncontrollably like wild fire –

one saying that, since Angela was one of the most beautiful woman on the planet, she either seduced the Orc Blacksmith or even sold her body for the favour. Another said that, since the Orc sold the Branded Goods rated weapon overseas, he was a traitor to the nation, etc, etc.

This forced Sae-Jin to issue a statement on SNS. Originally, he thought of holding a press conference, but then, officially at least, he was not the Orc Blacksmith so, he thought it was not appropriate which made him choose SNS instead.

When a Korean Knight rises up to a certain rank, he or she begins to think that it's embarrassing to be publicly seen while visiting a blacksmith. Unfortunately for them, blacksmiths also have their own honour as well. And that's why the Orc Blacksmith had chosen Miss Angela who had treated him with respect.

His post was spread among his 400 thousand-strong followers and soon, Yu Sae-Jung and Kim Yu-Rin both shared it as well; and with the aid of the Dawn, the public's opinion on the matter had reversed almost overnight. And Angela became his SNS follower too, by the way.

The arrows of blame and criticism were then pointed firmly on the Knights Orders and the media outlets biased towards the said Orders, with some saying that by dismissing blacksmiths in that typically complacent attitude, Republic of Korea was failing to read the ever-changing flow of the world.

However... all this war of words got buried real fast by the emergence of a new, hot topic.

And that was the news of the Dawn Knights Order affiliated upper Mid Tier Knight, Joo Ji-Hyuk becoming the newest member of the Society, The Monster.

Sae-Jin's Society had grown to the point where every little rumour concerning admittance and dismissal of its members would cause a stir; so, only a day after he submitted the official documents to the relevant government entity, countless numbers of articles exploded out into the open.

Right away, reporters swarmed Ji-Hyuk with requests for interviews and film shoots; as for the man himself, although he was quite flustered by this development, he still managed to reply as normally as possible:

"The Chairman Kim Sae-Jin admires every one of the Society's members, and I am deeply grateful to be able to join them."

On top of that, simply by becoming the member of The Monster, Joo Ji-Hyuk was now chosen as one of the '30 most promising Knights to watch this year' by the foremost authority on all things Knight-related, the weekly publication called 'Night of Knight'. (TL: that's the name. The author wrote that in English, even.)

However.

The Chairman responsible for causing all this attention and ruckus was currently stuck inside a certain cave in the Monster field.

'Can you fly now?'

The Orc Form Kim Sae-Jin was busy sending 'thought orders' to the Griffin while sitting atop the saddle mounted on the creature's back.

-Kkiirook??

The Griffin, with its body quite big now, tilted its head while its tongue hung loose.

The amazing rate of growth was a specific trait of Monsters. Only three weeks after its birth, the Griffin had grown up into a level comparable to an adolescent.

'I said, can you fly now?'

Sae-Jin had named his Griffin, Muffin. He took 'riffin' off Griffin and then somehow turned that into Muffin.

When Muffin didn't seem to understand what he was saying, Sae-Jin sent out another 'thought message'. But, as if Muffin misunderstood his intentions, it craned its head towards him and began licking his face instead.

"Khreung, Kheurereung!!!"

In the end, Sae-Jin became cross, and only then, Muffin understood his intentions.

SFX for wind rustling through feathers

When the winds slipped in between the feathers of a giant pair of flapping hawk-like wings, Muffin began rising up to the sky while carrying Sae-Jin on its back.

Since it hadn't matured fully into an adult yet, and with the Orc's considerable weight added on top, they could only try out a low altitude flight that just barely cleared the tops of the trees.

But the feeling Sae-Jin was experiencing at that moment was indescribably amazing.

Until he heard the alarmed cries of unknown people from below.

"Eu, eu-ark!! It's a Griffin!!!"

The low-altitude flight got spotted really fast; and the Hunters and Knights plying their trade here in the Lowest Tier hunting ground didn't even stay to confirm who was riding on top of the Griffin before hastily running away.

Since this was going to become a nuisance, Sae-Jin had to land back on earth after spending only a few short minutes flying.

"...How regretful."

Tserp.

He licked his lips as he secured Muffin against the resting area he had created inside the cave.

"...I wanna take you home."

Changing back to his Human Form, Sae-Jin sighed and brushed the head of the Griffin. He found his Muffin so lovable, what with its eyes arced in a half-moon from absolutely enjoying his attention.

He slowly got up from his seat while deeply agonising whether he should hold a press conference and then just announce to the world that he had succeeded in taming a Monster.

"I'll be back by the nightfall. Wait for me here."

Sae-Jin waved his hands as he left the cave.

And shortly thereafter.

Left all alone, Muffin slapped the toy Sae-Jin left for it away with its two forearms and then, yawned out as if it was bored silly. As if the smile it showed to Sae-Jin just now was all forced, its current appearance was cold and aloof.

< 16. A Blueprint of the Future (3) > Fin.

Chapter 57: The Omen (1)

4th of April, the time when the skies would slowly become clearer.

With her training ending sooner than expected, Yu Sae-Jung was left with nothing much to do, so she decided to head to the HQ of The Monster located in the Gangwon Province.

It was to check out how things were progressing in the Society, as well as to share a conversation with the Chairman, Kim Sae-Jin.

"The HQ building looks really nice."

However, there was a fly that had just landed in her ointment.

An upper Mid Tier Knight, Joo Ji-Hyuk.

His eyes went round as he studied the building of his own Society. It was a bit hard to believe such a stylish and elaborately constructed structure was reserved for the exclusive usage of a single 'C-Class' Society.

"Yes, well... It's quite obvious, isn't it? The Dawn Corporation had built it, after all. So, of course it's nice."

Yu Sae-Jung answered disinterestedly and entered the building while making that characteristic noise from a pair of high heels. Joo Ji-Hyuk carefully followed in right behind her.

"Welcome."

As soon as they entered the reception, an unbelievably beautiful woman greeted them. The ground floor counter was manned by a female Elf. Yu Sae-Jung's brows narrowed almost immediately the moment she spotted the Elf, and while carrying a strange expression, she approached the receptionist.

"...Are you an employee here?"

"Yes. I was working as a manager in the Orc's Forge before being promoted to this position."

Even when facing Yu Sae-Jung's wary voice, the Elf replied in a very polite manner.

"Hmm... Well, okay. That's that, but where is Sae-Jin Oppa right now?"

"The Society Chairman came in the early hours of this morning but he has returned home now."

"...Ah."

Yu Sae-Jung lightly bit her lower lip. She was feeling irritated for some reason. If Sae-Jin just replied to her messages, then she'd not have wasted time coming over here like this... Just what the heck could he be doing during these three hours?

"Got it."

Yu Sae-Jung replied tersely and turned on her heels to walk out of the building, but then...

"Oh, that's too bad. Ah, by the way, can you tell me where the training facility is?"

Joo Ji-Hyuk started asking about a training facility she didn't even know about. With a dumbstruck expression, Yu Sae-Jung glanced at him.

"A training facility?! Now why would a..."

"It's on the 1st Basement Level." (Elf receptionist)

"...Excuse me? It's really here? I mean, but why is it here?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Pardon? I am not aware of the reasons, but the Chairman commissioned two to be built. One is on the basement, while the other on the top floor. The top floor facility is reserved only for the Chairman's private use, but it's not completed yet." (Elf receptionist)

Yu Sae-Jung got surprised at the Elf's words, and began glaring at Joo Ji-Hyuk instead. Her gaze seemed to contain several complex meanings, including one that said, how the heck did you know something that I don't even know until now?!

"Ah, that, well... The Chairman gave me a call not too long ago. He said that a prototype Athany doll version 2.0 is installed there so I should come and test it out when I find some free time."

Joo Ji-Hyuk scratched the back of his neck and slowly advanced towards the elevator's entrance. And Yu Sae-Jung just dazedly stared at his back.

*

While Yu Sae-Jung was feeling let down by Kim Sae-Jin, the man himself had completed his quota of hunting for the day and was returning to the Rest Stop of the Monster field in a relaxed fashion.

- There have been simultaneous and frequent occurrences of Monster Outbreaks around the world. Currently, many cities in the United States of America, Japan and China are beset with these Outbreaks, but not only that, the world is shivering in fear at the revelation that the causes of these Outbreaks are not the Fissures....

As soon as he arrived in the Rest Stop, the first thing to enter his ears was the news broadcast from the TV installed to the side.

The resting Knights and Hunters were paying careful attention to the unusual nature of the news while discussing it among themselves, but Sae-Jin didn't have the time to do that.

He only had five hours as a Human everyday. And that sure was way too short to live like a human, too. On top of that, he had to go to the bank today as well.

So, he quickened his pace.

*

"Thank you for your patronage!!"

Sitting inside the VIP room of Gangwondo Bank, Kim Sae-Jin

checked the latest balance printed on his bank book while being treated with utmost courtesy by the branch manager.

And boy, were they enormous or what. The American Knight Angela paid close to \$18 million US for the weapon so that was understandable, but he sure didn't expect her to send another \$18 million again....

"Perhaps, if you haven't given a concrete thought on managing your personal wealth, may we recommend skilled asset management specialists..."

The bank's branch manager carefully made his suggestion, while busy rubbing his hands like a house fly. However, the colour visible in his eyes were badly leaning on the wrong side, so Sae-Jin coldly shook his head.

"No, thank you. I shall take care of..."

Kwaaaang!!!

It was then – out of nowhere, a powerful blast could be heard from the outside. Then, it was followed by an eerie tremor right after. At these ominous events, both Sae-Jin and the branch manager froze on the spot.

"What was tha... Eu-euht?!"

KWAHAAANG!!!

An explosion even louder than the one before could be heard this time. Sensing something had gone very wrong, Sae-Jin quickly pressed onto the window and tried to gauge the situation outside.

"...What the hell is that?!"

And that's how he started muttering in a total daze without realising it.

Maybe, the news he half listened to while exiting the Rest Stop must have been the sign.

SFX for loud screeching noises of Monsters

The downtown of Gangwon had turned into a scene from hell. It even felt like deja vu of the Seoul Monster Outbreak.

Gigantic Wyverns hung in the blue sky like gathering dark clouds, and Gargoyles were firing off evil magic spells towards the ground while being backed by those Wyverns.

Not only that, there were countless Monsters lining up the pavement. Not just Wolves, Goblins and other low Tiered Monsters, but even Lichs, Ogres and also, a dang Manticore.

It was enough to make him wonder whether this was a Monster field or the middle of a city.

"Hey, man!! You need to..."

Sae-Jin was going to ask the branch manager about how he'd deal with this suddenly-unfolding emergency situation, but the motherf*cking manager had already ran out of the VIP room like a released arrow.

As expected, a person's body would never lie.

Sighing out deeply, Sae-Jin was about to break the windows and make his getaway from here.

"Kyaaaahk!! Wha, what's going on here?!"

"Eu-ah ah ah!! Run!! Run away!!"

But before he could do that, screams of people coming from downstairs weighed heavily on his mind. He could confirm with his nose that the closest Monster just happened to be Orcs and a Manticore.

He could somehow deal with Orcs, fine, but in Human Form, Kim Sae-Jin had no hope in hell against a Manticore.

SFX for window glass breaking up

Sae-Jin gave up. He slammed his fist against the glass and it

shattered so easily. And he was about to jump downstairs and escape, when...

SFX for a young child crying

His body froze after hearing the belated cries of a child from below.

He gritted his teeth and quickly took a look around the VIP room.

The Eyes of the Wolf could also spot hidden things just like how he could spot people's auras. Thankfully, he didn't see any CCTV cameras installed within this VIP room.

"Ha-ah..."

He spat out a sigh.

When he concentrated his olfactory senses, he could sense many signs of Knights hurriedly mobilising with haste since this was the downtown area – but all of them were quite a distance away from where he was.

'And I'm not even a Superhero from a 60s comic book...'

One more intake of a deep breath...

And then, inside the VIP room, instead of Kim Sae-Jin, an Orc was standing there.

"Krooarrr..."

The Orc took a step back, before roughly pouncing on his feet and dashed towards the window.

SFX for concrete wall breaking apart

Not just the windows but the section of the bank's wall crumbled down and within this gap, a giant Orc fell down like a falling meteor.

Kwaaang!!

A powerful shock wave spread out as it made landfall. At that moment, citizens running away from the Monsters, as well as the Monsters busy chasing said citizens, froze on the spot and stared at the Orc that fell from the sky.

With its entire body covered in blue scales and an ominous aura oozing out from its eyes, the Orc swapped the ends of his gaze between humans and Monsters, before smashing its mace towards the nearby Monster.

*

The moment unidentified Monsters descended on the city, the bank's deputy branch manager came up with an ingenious idea on the spot and activated the security systems of the building. And thanks to that, customers inside the bank were temporarily safe.

Kwang-Kwang- Kwang-

But as the word suggested, it was just a temporary respite. The Mana-reinforced metal security sheets blocking the exits were cracking under the strain of constant barrage from the Monsters.

There could only be two outcomes if things continued this way. The metal sheets would break before the Knights arrive, or the whole building might collapse from the Monsters' attacks instead.

"...Fuu."

The deputy manager sighed. There were too many people to protect here. However...

SFX for metal ripping open

From one particularly strong impact, the gaps between the metal sheets widened as if they might break apart at any moment. There really was no time left anymore. He had to decide now.

The deputy manager clenched his fists tightly and shouted out.

"Everyone, stand up and head for the bank's vault!!"

The one place in the bank that best protected money was its vault, and it also could just as well protect people, too.

But that idea came about one step too late. Before anyone could act...

Kwaaaaang!!

The Mana-reinforced metal sheets gave in first.

SFX for a Monster's footsteps

The serene footsteps of the Monster that contrasted with the chaos of outside, rebounded within the walls of the bank and it was enough to give despair to all the people present here.

The face that resembled that of a person, a body of a lion and a pair of bat-like wings on the back – a hideous Chimera-type Monster.

An upper Mid Tier Monster infamous for its wickedness and also its physical might – the Manticore.

The creature entered the bank with what looked like a smile on its face, and then leisurely scanned the crowd of terrified humans.

And then, it trudged towards a woman holding a child in her arms first.

" "

Even as the Manticore approached her, the mother never let her child go as the flood of fearful tears fell out of her eyes.

"Keuhehehe..."

However, Manticore seemed to enjoy her appearance, instead. It licked its lips and broke out in a laughter. The sound coming from the crooked lips on that human-like face also sounded pretty close to that of a person.

"Euhahaha!!"

Manticore didn't wait any further. The Monster continued to laugh out in that evil and vile manner, as the tentacle acting as its tail began dividing into tens and then to hundreds of strands. It was preparing a cruel and vicious attack that would turn every single one inside this bank into meat paste in an instant.

And as people closed their eyes in fear of the horrible deaths to come...

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"———!!"
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A roar filled with fighting spirit that could not be described in words rang out to everywhere.

SFX for loud, powerful footsteps

And right after that, accompanied by the violent-sounding footsteps, a giant silhouette rushed towards the Manticore and swung its weapon.

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"Kkheu-eck!!"
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The weapon smashed into the face of the Manticore as it folded the air; and the Manticore was launched into the deeper parts of the bank like a kicked empty can of soda.

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"""""""
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The person, no the lifeform, that blew away the Manticore with a single shot was... an Orc. And it was an Orc with its body covered in blue scales.

It was a creature famous enough for some people here to recognise it – also known as the Demon Orc.

Silence fell on the bank at this sudden entrance of an unlikely ally.

Of course, that silence didn't last for long. Monsters poured in from the bank's now-broken doors. And the Orc firmly stood there like the guardian and began destroying everything that came his way.

Whenever it swung its mace, the limbs of Monsters got easily torn off like pieces of fabric, and the torn bits flew around in the air. Blood spurted out like fountains and coated the interior of the bank, leaving behind a strange and sticky mess.

No matter what, it was a gut-wrenching sight. But, for the citizens staring at the back of this Orc, they sensed this inexplicable feeling of trust.

"Keu-ehehe. Heuheu..."

"...Sh*t. It didn't die."

As the Orc was fighting, the laughter of the Manticore came out from a distance. Sae-Jin bit his lips at this troubling turn of events.

He tried to kill it with a single shot so he even activated the 'Warrior of Reversal' and the 'Fierce Strike', but... Manticore did live up to its infamy.

SFX for heavy footsteps

He could hear the sounds of a lion running behind his back. However, the front of him was also packed with Monsters so how could he pay attention to his back? He then decided to leave everything to Leviathan's Scales.

Khwajeek!!

But contrary to his hopes, the fangs of the Manticore easily penetrated the Leviathan's scales. At the scalding pain bursting out from his shoulder, Sae-Jin had to scream out in anguish.

"—!!"

And that pain soon morphed into anger. He roared out powerfully, before grabbing the Manticore's tail and threw it against the wall, hard.

But that meant he could not deal with the Monsters in his front.

This time, it was the turn of a 'Spartoi'. True to its fame as the undead skeletal warrior formed from the bones of a dragon, its might was considerable.

SFX for a blade cutting against skin

The cold bone sword swung by the undead Monster left a deep wound on the Orc's side.

'I gotta get out of here...'

After receiving two critical blows, and with the time limit for the Warrior of Reversal coming to an end, his consciousness became dizzy. Thankfully, he still had a means of escape in the form of 'Whirlwind Dash', so it was now prudent to stop here and leave everything to the Knights...

"Krroooarr..."

But before that, he just had to smash that ugly-as-sh*t Spartoi apart or he wouldn't feel better, so he swung the mace hard at the head of the bony Monster.

SFX for things scattering

The Monster's cranium that got struck by the Fierce Strike containing all of the Orc's strength exploded into tiny bits and got scattered in the winds. Then, strength abandoned Sae-Jin by the bucket loads, making his legs falter. Even though the Manticore still lived, this was clearly his limit...

However - suddenly, anger rushed in.

Orcs detested retreating more than defeat; and hated defeat more than death itself. Was it something like the instinct of its race, or the chain of logic for Orcs that had to be followed no matter what – from somewhere deep inside him, indeterminable desire for battle and anger whipped around violently.

"—!!"

It was just impossible to contain all these emotions and so, Sae-Jin let out a powerful roar without even realising it.

The Orc then tightly grasped the mace once more.

And right in that moment...

An unexpected alert window floated up to his view.

Simultaneously, the sleepy consciousness sobered up and the excruciating pain from his wounds subsided immediately.

[Condition complete: A desperate battle for survival, the Orc's tenacity (2/2)]

[The Monster Form of the Orc Jaguar will change into the Orc Great Warrior.]

[The Passive Skill, 'Warrior's Special Quality' (Skill Level F) has been acquired.]

< 17. The Omen (1) > Fin.

Chapter 58: The Omen (2)

He didn't even have the time to check the new skill out.

As soon as he evolved into the Orc Great Warrior, the Warrior of Reversal got activated once more. Right away, his stamina that had hit rock bottom rose up again like the rising dragon uppercut, and an unbearable strength spread throughout his body.

"—!!!"

The Orc let out a roar that could rip the world apart; and then, he powerfully slammed his mace against the empty air.

Kwaaaang!!!

The shock wave spreading out from the air formed a crescent moon shape and turned every Monster coming in contact into smithereens. As expected, the power on display was on another level compared to that of the Orc Jaguar.

And with that single attack, the Monsters inundating his front got completely wiped out.

Of course, there was still one creature left here.

The Orc spat out rough breaths and turned around.

The Manticore had stepped back and was surveying the situation after the Orc's vigour went a sudden reversal – as if it was studying the scene, with its tentacle-like tail swaying gently back and forth.

Unfortunately for the Monster, the Orc's instincts would not allow for such an easy-going attitude.

The Orc rushed towards the Manticore as his feet crushed the tiles of the bank's floor underfoot. The incredible turn of speed displayed by the creature did not match up with its huge, muscular body.

There was simply no time for the Manticore to take an evasive action; it could only stare at the approaching mace wielded by the

Orc helplessly.

SLAM!!

That was the final, final strike. An attack with every ounce of power squeezed out of the Orc separated the head of the Manticore from its body cleanly.

Splash...

And after it lost its head, the Manticore's sticky blood sprayed on the floor.

....

The only thing remaining afterwards was silence.

The overflowing aura of danger oozing from the Orc Great Warrior scared away the lower Tiered Monsters from getting near it, and thanks to that, the bank could somehow enjoy a lengthy bout of quiet stillness that was obviously contrary to the severe emergency situation on the outside.

Unfortunately, though, Sae-Jin's own situation wasn't so stable at the moment.

"...D**n it, the bleeding won't stop."

Breathing with some difficulty, Sae-Jin stumbled around for a moment or two while enduring the aftereffects and then began to move his feet. As the dazed eyes of the bank's customers followed him, he trudged out of the bank altogether.

Was it because he had used the 'Warrior of Reversal' twice, as well as abused 'Fierce Strike' quite a lot? His consciousness was getting sleepier by the second and his sights were blurring rapidly. Even still, he searched for a deserted area. If he ended up passing out like this, then everything he had built up until now would be gone. He could never allow that to happen...

He desperately walked on and on until he found a partially destroyed building. He quickly hid among the rubble and once

more, made sure there were no eyes around him. Fortunately, there were none but even if there were, his time had run out anyway.

He then assumed the Ebony Wolf Form for the first time in a long while and activated 'Whirlwind Dash'. Like a black lightning, the Wolf sped along quickly towards the safety of his own house.

The way this event unfolded was quite similar to how the Monster Outbreak that occurred in Seoul half a year ago played out.

But there was one crucial difference. The conclusion from the investigation to the cause of this disturbance was that there was not a single trace of a Fissure to be found anywhere.

There were two ways Monsters could end up attacking a city.

One was where a Fissure opened up near a settlement and the countless Monsters contained within poured out like a hailstorm. The other possibility was that some 'wild' Monsters aimlessly wandering outside the Monster field somehow evaded the patrols and walked into a nearby city.

Since there was no Fissure, the former option had to be dismissed. But there were just too many Monsters in this event to say the latter option was the cause. And so, the government, as well as the UN investigators, could not even begin to grasp the potential reason for this incident.

On top of that, another unfortunate thing happened. A truly destructive piece of news was broadcast that caused much consternation among the so-called experts, while at the same time, it caused much fanfare from the general public.

- This is the footage captured by the CCTV cameras of the Demon Orc. The Orc swings its mace around and kills countless other Monsters, and it's as if the creature is trying to protect the people trapped inside the bank. And the following footage is taken from a male student's mobile phone who was also trapped within the same bank. It shows the development of the situation more clearly.

The Demon Orc that made so many Knights taste defeat in the Monster field, had now become the 'Hero' Orc that protected many people from other Monsters. Some people even jokingly suggested nonsense like the Orc should be awarded with a medal or some such.

- Hahaha. We've already received real-time requests to correct the term we used, the 'Demon' Orc. We'd like to sincerely apologise. We shall change it to the 'Hero' Orc from now on. By the way, by calling it the 'Hero' Orc, does it not evoke the feeling of a video game or a legendary tale of the distant past?
- Indeed, hahaha. It does feel that way. But what's really interesting is that, with the arrival of this 'Hero' Orc, even the way people call the Orc Blacksmith has gone through a certain change as well. Like, the Two Orcs that help the humanity or something like that.

Almost all the TV channels were talking about the stories related to the Orc. Not only the TV stations, even the internet, the SNS, etc, etc were also dominated by it.

"That's so mysterious. Judging from the footage, that Orc's beard and the hair was really long so, most likely it has grown past the level of a Jaguar now. There must be something really special about that guy... Gosh, I wanna meet him at least once."

Even Hazeline was the same, while sitting by Sae-Jin's bedside and leisurely enjoying a tangerine.

"That Orc... Kkheung... You differentiate Orcs by their hair style? I thought that was only for Lichs."

Sae-Jin's brows tightened from the pain coming from his sides whenever he tried to speak. However, Hazeline didn't even spare him who was suffering in agony a single glance; she replied while only paying attention towards the TV on the wall.

"Of course. Mister Sae-Jin, you've never seen a real Orc Great Warrior before, haven't you? You have no idea how cool they are in reality. Lengthy beards, long hair tied at the back; the hair and the beard symbolises the level of experience and strength for Orcs."

"I didn't know that. By the way... are you sure you used a potion that I've made? This... the pain doesn't seem to be lessening at all?!"

Sae-Jin moaned in pain as he touched his side. Currently, his situation was that, the wounds he suffered during the Orc Great Warrior carried over even to his Human Form.

He couldn't move freely because of the severity of the wounds, resulting him unable to concoct a potion by himself and so, he came up with a hasty excuse and asked Hazeline to send him one, instead.

However, he wasn't expecting to see Hazeline herself show up rather than some gopher.

"Well, of course. You said you got struck by a Spartoi? A wound from the Spartoi's bone sword is difficult to treat, so it can't be helped, you know. So, please endure for now. Nyam."

Hazeline continuously ate tangerine pieces one at a time even while speaking her words. Chew~chew. Those cute and smooth lips bobbed up and down rather adorably.

"...I think it's fine for you to go now, you know?"

Sae-Jin muttered in disbelief after watching her act like this. It had been almost 30 minutes since she showed up. And so far, she had already consumed more than 20 tangerines without a break. He was really grateful for her bringing the potion, but... he didn't have a lot of time left.

...And his tangerine stock was running out, too.

"Mm? No, it's alright. Not sure why, but being here puts my mind at ease... Nyam."

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"Nyam. NyamNyam."

He was about to say something, but Sae-Jin stopped for a moment or two. Maybe because she was an Elf, although she was simply eating tangerine, the whole scene looked like it was straight out of some famous painting or some such.

"NyamNam." (TL: in case if you're wondering what this is, it's a literal TL of Korean onomatopoeia, the overtly cute-ish sound made by girls and children when eating something delicious.)

Besides the weird noise leaking out of her mouth, that was.

"...Please, just get going already, would you? It's getting late, you know?"

Another five minutes went by while he observed her obsession with the fruit called tangerine. So, Sae-Jin pleaded with her again.

"No, it's fine. I don't have much to do today anyways. Because of all the chaos, looks like the Alchemy House will go on a break too... While I'm here, my mind really feels so comfortable."

At her relaxed reply, Sae-Jin's brows twitched automatically. How come she was acting so dense right now?

"If you feel that uncomfortable, I will get going in around 30 minutes."

Sae-Jin quickly confirmed the remaining time for himself. There was just over 2 hours and 23 minutes. Since there was some wiggle room here, he relaxed a bit and gently lied down on the bed.

And exactly 30 minutes later, Hazeline did leave while saying, "Get well soon, okay~?"

As the experts had feared, this incident with the Monsters was not a one-off thing. From all corners of the country, small to mid scale attacks involving Monsters broke out dozens of times a day. In the end, the Korean government declared a temporary state of emergency throughout the entire country and at the same time, ordered all the Knights Orders to be in state of readiness.

However – the focus of the public was directed elsewhere, regardless of whether there was a state of emergency declared or not. And that was the topic of the so-called 'Good' Monsters.

The public was going crazy with excitement at the 'Demon' Orc that had appeared during the chaos, rescued people and then abruptly disappeared from the scene. It was the same story around the world as well.

SNS and community chat rooms were focused only on delivering any new news stories related to this 'Hero' Orc. And serious discussions regarding the topics of 'if Monsters could be tamed', or 'Monsters that can possibly communicate with people' with the 'Demon/Hero' Orc as the main subject took place among the academic circles.

'What the hell are these...'

However, despite these hot reactions, the man responsible was just feeling dumbfounded at the moment. He bitterly chuckled as he read the news articles and comments sections full of people praising the Orc.

Knock, knock.

Someone knocked on his door. Sae-Jin put his mobile phone down and said, "Come in". Jo Hahn-Sung walked in with an armful of documents in tow.

"What is it?"

"These are purchase request forms for the Athany doll version

2.0. As a result of expanding the scope of operations worldwide as ordered by you, the Chairman, we've received requests from hundreds of Knights Orders located throughout the globe. Even if we schedule meetings right away, at least a month is ne...."

"Ah, that. Please, you should take care of that matter, Mister Hahn-Sung. You are the Chief of the marketing department, after all."

"....Huh?!"

Jo Hahn-Sung initially thought he heard wrong.

Nowadays, as a simple merchandise, one Athany doll would go for several tens of millions of dollars. But when taking into consideration whether a Knights Order owned an Athany doll or not affected the prestige of the said Order, then the real value of that doll was truly astronomical.

Seriously, even the Korean government's Foreign Relations Office ended up sending a half-a-favour, half-threatening request, asking for an Athany doll to be sold to them in order to use it as a tool for diplomacy between nations. An Athany diplomacy, as they had put it.

So, just why would the Chairman give such an important business matter to a mere former deputy of a marketing department like himself?

"Oh, by the way, Mister Hahn-Sung. Please take a seat over there."

"Pardon?"

"Quickly."

"Oh, yes. Yes, of course."

Jo Hahn-Sung was still in a somewhat dazed state, but he somehow walked towards the front of Sae-Jin and sat down on his opposite side. The pleasant scent coming off Sae-Jin helped in relaxing his mind a little.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but the highest academic degree you've earned is a doctorate in the Monster Anthropology, yes?"

"Yes. I also earned a Bachelor's in Economics as well."

"Mm. That's good. And that is why..."

Sae-Jin scratched the back of his neck and hesitated a little. His expression was whether he should openly discuss this matter or not.

"...Well, here's the thing. In your opinion, how would the public, the media and the government react when, hypothetically speaking, it's announced that a Monster has been tamed?"

Jo Hahn-Sung tilted his head in confusion. Since what he heard was so outrageous, he thought it must've been a joke. However, Sae-Jin's face showed he was dead serious.

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"S, so, you're saying you can actually communicate with Monsters, is that what you're saying?!"

"...Well, yeah. It's something like that. You can think of it as one of my Skills."

Sae-Jin spoke up to here and entered the elevator, which prompted Jo Hahn-Sung to hurriedly follow him while still carrying a confused expression.

"But just how did you tame a Griffin? It's famous as a unruly and vicious creature, after all."

"I found an egg by accident, so I began brainwashing it since it hatched. With my Skill, I can use a bit of power of coercion as well, you see."

Tting-

The elevator soon arrived on the rooftop.

The layout of the roof on the Society's HQ was peculiar. There was no roof so the sky was visible, but all the sides were blocked by opaque glasses that made it impossible to look inwardly from the outside.

It was the result of the construction work that started a week ago, but to think, it was all for a Griffin...

Jo Hahn-Sung ended up gulping down his saliva.

"It's over there. It's living in that cave-like structure."

Sae-Jin spoke as he pointed towards the section of the roof that was shaped into a deep and dark artificial cave. Seeing that, a sigh involuntarily escaped his lips, just remembering how troublesome it was to move that creature over here...

"In all honesty, I was planning to keep it a secret for a while longer. But coincidentally, the topic of taming Monsters is doing the rounds thanks to the incident with that Orc. Since the timing seemed right, and also, if I don't take this chance, it somehow feels like there will never be another one in the future..."

Sae-Jin stopped talking here and whistled. Then, there was a strange vibration coming out from the cave.

"Euhurk?!"

Jo Hahn-Sung hastily took a step back.

Completely disregarding that, the vibration coming from the cave intensified – until, finally...

- Kkiieck-!!

A single Griffin revealed its beautiful appearance.

The beautiful and tidy white fur on its head imparting the impression of a nobility and the sturdy, powerfully built body of a lion – without a doubt, that mysterious being was a Griffin, a creature rarely spotted even in the wilderness...

Jo Hahn-Sung's brain stopped working then.

"It's pretty docile, actually. Its name is 'Muffin'. I took the last two syllables off 'Griffin' but 'Riffin' sounded a bit lacking, so..."

Kim Sae-Jin left behind Jo Hahn-Sung whose entire thought process had grinded to a halt, and approached Muffin. While gently patting its head, he began sending more 'thought orders' to the creature.

'Humans are your friends. Jo Hahn-Sung is a human. So, Jo Hahn-Sung is your friend.'

"Would you like to touch it?"

Sae-Jin secured the safety measures just in case, and then called for Jo Hahn-Sung.

In that moment, Hahn-Sung felt goosebumps exploding on his skin out of sheer shock. But then, the dedication of a scholar he had to bury deep in his heart reacted first. That something within him, that instinct he had to abandon in order to get a job and to survive in this world, made his legs move.

Gulp.

Before he realised it himself, Hahn-Sung had walked to the place right in front of the Griffin and was carefully reaching his hand out.

Muffin didn't even show a hint of hostility at all. It just had its eyes closed, quietly accepting the arrival of a new person.

Pat, pat.

And that's how he succeeded in brushing the head of a Griffin. It was unbelievably soft.

"...How is it? It's amazing, right?"

"Yes. It, it truly is."

Kim Sae-Jin smiled in satisfaction. He was actually looking for

someone to share the responsibilities of looking after the Griffin. And now, the perfect person for the job was right here.

"T... that's it. Nice and easy."

In the eyes of Jo Hahn-Sung who was busy stroking the Griffin, flames of strong desire lit up.

"Mister Jo Hahn-Sung. Since it has come to this, how about taking on the role of the Chief of the Monster Research department as well? I will double your monthly salary. If you want, I am prepared to offer you more."

Sae-Jin's smile resembled that of a devil's. But to Jo Hahn-Sung's point of view, that smile sure looked like that of an angel's.

*

After Sae-Jin had left.

Jo Hahn-Sung, with his chest full of determination to take care of Muffin's...

'Huh? Where did it go?'

"Mm? What is it, Muffin?"

When Hahn-Sung called out, Muffin revealed itself again. This time, though, there was a ball between its beaks.

"You want to play?"

Hahn-Sung smiled and reached out for the ball. However, Muffin chucked the ball to a corner, and then...

KKIIIEEECKK!!!!

"Euaaark?!"

Muffin stretched its wings wide open and began threatening Jo Hahn-Sung. Its appearance had gone a complete 180 from when Sae-Jin was here.

"...But, but, why?"

Muffin continued to point at the ball with one of her front limbs and threatened him. He understood just a bit what she wanted from him, so he hurriedly ran over to the ball and brought it back to her. (TL: yep, Muffin is a female.)

"Here."

Khrrng.

As she was satisfied by that, Muffin bestowed the privilege of stroking her head one more time to Hahn-Sung while carrying a purely evil grin.

"R, right.... There, there."

Unfortunately for him, that was not the end. She then picked the ball up again, and this time, she threw it a little bit further – outside the roof altogether.

""

The ball drew a gentle arc as it flew outside the roof of the Society's HQ, and landed somewhere on the grasslands near the building. And as Jo Hahn-Sung stood there in daze with his mouth agape at this needlessly cruel act, Muffin slowly approached him and then...

Kkiiieeeeck!!

She expanded her wings again and loudly spat out a cry that said... Hurry up!!

< 17. The Omen (2) > Fin.

Chapter 59: The Omen (3)

Things progressed quickly.

First, with the aid of the Dawn, Sae-Jin could safely negotiate complicated 'consultations' and 'interview' procedures with the Korean government as well as other related organizations. Of course, the person who had attended all these meetings was not Kim Sae-Jin, but Jo Hahn-Sung instead.

However, some information got leaked to the press in the midst of all that and landed on the front pages of many newspapers. That prompted Sae-Jin to hold an official press conference and later on, submit images of Muffin performing a test flight to the press.

As expected, the voices of opposition were numerous. The organizations related to Monsters approached him with crazed fervor, while several hardline Knights showed up with their weapons drawn, saying they came to kill the Monster.

But then, only a week later, most of the opposing media outlets got suppressed ruthlessly and smoothly when Sae-Jin uploaded a footage to his SNS profile.

In that footage, one could see Muffin with her eyes arching gently, smiling in a lovable manner. The cute sound of giggling captured within the short clip proved to be a nice bonus, too.

One could also see Jo Hahn-Sung having a somewhat bitter face while looking at Muffin during the filming of this footage but to Sae-Jin, his Griffin was just the most adorable pet ever.

At that perfectly-tamed appearance, the academic circles hotly debating the pros and cons of this whole thing became utterly stunned. Well, they believed that this master-slave relationship was a temporary one enabled by the promise of food, after all. But from that footage, it seemed like the creature had been truly tamed by the owner and was loving the presence of humans.

And so, most of the media shifted towards the "Yes" side.

In the middle of this, though, a strange opinion suddenly popped out of nowhere. And it was enough to send Sae-Jin into a bit of 'panic mode'.

The original instigator of that opinion was unexpectedly some entertainment TV show.

- So, are you saying that 'he' can potentially speak to the 'Hero Orc' as well?

It was basically a talk show for Knights to come on air and share their stories. Yu Sae-Jung was the guest this time, and the emcee naturally asked her about Kim Sae-Jin.

- Eh? Well... Probably. But I dunno what is what exactly. I'm just a gopher, you know. Yep, that's exactly it, I am a gopher. I never know what is going on. And he never tells me anything anyway. But, that's because I'm just a gopher, you see?

She was upset by the fact that Sae-Jin had not told her a single thing about what was going on with the Society. And so, whenever the topic of him came around, she always spoke in a very unhappy manner.

- ... Ahhh, so that's how it was.

And that topic came to an end with only three paragraphs uttered, but the aftermath of that show was puzzlingly fierce.

Firstly, the sight of Yu Sae-Jung referring to herself as a gopher in the self-mocking tone must have left a deep impression, as gifs of that moment spread throughout the internet; and naturally, the contents of that interview received much interest as well.

Since it had not killed anyone but actually rescued people, wouldn't it be possible to talk to the Hero Orc? An actual professor from the Hankook University came to speak to Sae-Jin about this very topic, even.

Of course, as the person who knew the truth, Sae-Jin was rather frustrated by the absurdity of it all.

"By the way, even I am curious if it's possible or not."

Kim Yu-Rin carefully asked Sae-Jin while taking a quick glance at his reactions.

Currently, albeit belated, these two people were making good on the promise they made over three weeks ago.

"...Even Miss Yu-Rin, too?!"

"Ha, haha. I'm sorry. As expected, it's nonsense, right? Hahaha, even I ended up saying some unnecessary things..."

Strangely, though, he found her state during dinner quite odd, to say the least. Every time she spoke, and whenever she moved, her eyes were always carefully observing changes in Sae-Jin's moods. It was so very different to how upfront and proud she was back then.

"Well... It's not a total nonsense, I guess. If we get to converse properly, then that Orc might truly help us."

"Ahaha, is that righ... ouch!"

Maybe it was because she was so tense, Yu-Rin ended up biting her tongue.

"Uhm, are you alright?"

"Ahh, yes. Ai aem phinee. Just... please excuse me. I should, to the 'ladies'..."

In the end, she hastily got up from her seat as if she was running away and headed for the bathroom.

'Just what is the matter with me?'

Standing in front of the washbasin and the mirror, Yu-Rin deeply sighed out. Even though she came here alone after having a showdown with Chae Young-Ho... But right now, she felt like

crying at the moment.

The burdensome words Chae Young-Ho told her – stuff like "He's an important person", "That man is the key to everything", "The Monster will someday follow on Trilogy's footsteps..." – continued to plague her mind.

And to make matters worse, there was the unbelievable news of him taming a Monster or some such, which resulted in her getting more nervous and that made it harder for her words to roll out of her mouth, too...

"Ahhhhh.... I just want to get out of here."

For Kim Yu-Rin, experiencing this sort of feeling was a first in all 27 years of her life. She had always been upfront with nothing to hide...

"Fuu..."

But she also did not know the meaning of giving up.

She washed her face with cold water once more, and left the bathroom while clenching her teeth tightly.

Inside the Dawn Knights Order's Team 1 Conference room.

Following the government's command for all Knights Orders to remain ready, there had to be a certain minimum number of Knights always present at all times and that was why, even though it was already late at night, there were a few personnel currently present within this conference room.

"...Fuu."

But what instead filled the room up to the brim were heavy atmosphere and thick silence.

The Knights inside this room were all keeping quiet while busy observing the souring mood of one person among their ranks.

"Ha..."

Yu Sae-Jung was continuously sighing out while carrying a deeply frowning expression.

Although it was somewhat bizarre to see all seven Knights here to remain mindful of someone only ranked low Mid Tier, she wasn't just anyone but Yu Sae-Jung.

Not only was she the daughter of the Order Master, she was also the founding member of the Society, 'The Monster'. Having said that, for some reason she'd been showing the self-mocking side of her lately, while busy repeating 'I'm the lowest form of a gopher ever for the Society'.

Tahng!!

Yu Sae-Jung suddenly slammed her phone down on the table. Everyone in the room stiffened up simultaneously.

"...Seriously."

...Is he not planning to call me back?!

The two tightly clenched fists of Yu Sae-Jung trembled.

Obviously, she was cross with Kim Sae-Jin. By a lot. Like, seriously a lot.

Even if it was in name only, she was still a founding member. But then, she had to hear the stories of her own Society, big and small, from other people or even from a news broadcast... Once or twice, fine, she can understand, but on multiple times? Was he deliberately trying to disparage her?

Such thoughts of disappointment began to form in her mind.

If one was to get technical here, then without a doubt, the Dawn Order and the Corporation helped Sae-Jin out immeasurably, never once putting him in a difficult spot until now. And everything that happened could only be possible because she asked her father and her grandfather. But him keeping her out of the

loop like this...

That was why, Yu Sae-Jung deliberately cut off all contact with Sae-Jin for the last two weeks.

Unfortunately for her, the one feeling the frustration was her, all the while he was going from strength to strength. Almost daily, he was uploading photos on SNS of him taking it easy with the 'members' of the Society, such as Joo Ji-Hyuk and Jo Hahn-Sung...

So, in the end, she had sent a really lengthy message to Sae-Jin roughly three hours ago.

It contained all of her accumulated disappointments – but she also placed emojis here and there to make sure she didn't sound too cold or anything.

"Seriously, how bloody infuriating."

She bit down on her teeth out of frustration and roughly tousled up her hair, before checking the message she sent to Sae-Jin on the phone.

He still hadn't read it yet.

She spat out another long sigh and this time, checked out his SNS profile. There was a new posting.

'What the heck is this now?!'

[Finished my first hunting with the Orc's Shortsword. To Chairman Kim Sae-Jin, I'd like to thank you for selling this weapon. I am using this weapon gratefully. Please send my regards to Mister Orc Blacksmith as well.]

It was from Victoria Angela. She bought a weapon from the Orc Blacksmith before. She posted a picture of her smiling next to a corpse of a Monster to Sae-Jin's SNS profile.

"Wah?! Seriously?"

In that moment, her annoyance shot up through the roof. His followers were now numbering over 950K, which means he was

snapping on her heels already... No, that was not important, nope.

Yu Sae-Jung threw the phone away and covered her face up.

The message containing all her thoughts – no, it'd be better to call it a letter – was being ignored for over three hours straight and she found this unbearably embarrassing, disappointing, and also deeply irritating.

Even then... she still took multiple quick glances at the discarded phone.

...Hoping that he had sent a reply.

"...Oww, this effing..."

Then, a sense of shame overwhelmed her and her head ended up lying sprawled over the table.

It was then.

Vuorrrrr....

The phone vibrated.

The agile movement exhibited by her body in that moment couldn't have been any more sharper than normally possible.

SFX for ungracefully tumbling around

She moved so fast that she nearly upended both the table and the chair as she grasped the phone. The words showing up on the liquid crystal display was 'Sae-Jin Oppa'. Her heart skipped a beat, then.

"Euh euh..."

However, she held herself back desperately. She had to endure this. She must not answer the phone right away. She should ignore this first attempt and only on the second one...

But what should I do if he doesn't call back?!

In the end, Yu Sae-Jung answered the phone after it vibrated four times.

"...Hello."

At first, she replied in a cold voice, her tone blunt.

- "Hey. I saw the message. My bad. I didn't know you were feeling that disappointed in me. You know me, my interpersonal skills have always been a bit terrible."

His baritone voice still sounded just as calming as before, but Sae-Jung was determined not to fold over easily this time. She was planning to remain cross for as long as possible...

- "Is it okay for us to meet and talk?"

Her heart skipped a beat again.

- "...B, b, but why? Now, why? Why meet and talk? It's already too late, you know."
 - "No, that, there's this thing I need to talk to you about."
- "T, that, fine, but why didn't you reply to my message for the last three hours? I sent it at 9 PM but now it's past midnight!!"
 - "My bad. I was busy with another matter."

For Sae-Jin, it was something impossible to talk about. The dinner with Kim Yu-Rin ended at 9 but when he got home, the time remaining on his Human Form ran out, so there was just no way for him to call her back as a Monster...

"What matter was it?"

- "Ah, that. I was talking to Miss Kim Yu-Rin..."

"Whaaat?! Why did you meet up with Miss Yu-Rin? Why? What was your purpose!!"

- "It was nothing special – we talked about the Raven Order, about Athany dolls, the weapons of the Orc Blacksmith, etc."

••••

At his reply, Yu Sae-Jung's forehead creased up in dissatisfaction. She somehow held back the question of "Were you alone with her?" circulating in her mouth. She didn't want to be seen as obsessive, after all. It was definitely not being obsessive, but actually being envious, but....

...Honestly, it was just that, nothing else.

- "So? Can we meet?"
- "....Yeah, well, sure. But I'm doing the night watch duty so not right now. Tomorrow... no, since it's past midnight, today. Let's meet up at seven o'clock in the morning. As soon as this night watch is over, I'll head straight to the Society HQ."

As soon as she was done talking, she abruptly hung up.

"Hah, taste your own medicine, see how it feels like."

"Huh? You're here already?"

It was in the early hours of the morning. As soon as Kim Sae-Jin opened the doors to the Chairman's office, he spotted Yu Sae-Jung dozing off while sitting on a chair.

"...You're here?"

Yawn~

Now that he had arrived, she stretched her limbs grandly and chased away the remnants of her drowsiness.

"Yeah."

He chuckled slightly and sat on her opposite side. Her messy, unkempt hair, a pair of bloodshot eyes... Now that was a sight wonderfully demonstrating how tough the night watchman job could be.

"Wait for a second...."

She dug through her pouch and pulled out a small mirror; and then got shocked by her appearance, so she hid her face and then got up from her seat. "Uhm, I should shower... no, no, let me go and wash up quickly. I look real untidy."

"Go ahead."

He graciously allowed her. What she was about to hear... would be quite shocking, after all. There was a need for her to prepare herself.

And ten minutes later. Yu Sae-Jung returned and sat back on her seat with her face still moist.

"...So, what did you want to talk about?"

Then, with her arms crossed, she asked coldly as if to display how hurt her feelings still were.

Sae-Jin lightly smiled and pointed at the sword hanging on her hips.

"Hand it over."

"Eh? W, why? What do you want do with it? You, you're not going to hit me with it, right?"

"...?? No, I'm not crazy. I just want to take a look. So, let me see."

His smooth voice contained some sort of charm that was hard for Yu Sae-Jung to oppose. Even though she was unsure, she still unsheathed the sword and handed it over to him.

"This... I crafted this sword."

However, she couldn't understand what he said next.

"...Excuse me? Ah, well... a fellow member of the Society did make it."

"No, no. That's not it... Keum. Right, for now, hand me a potion from your pouch, too."

This time, Sae-Jin pointed at her thigh-mounted pouch containing her batch of potions. It was a well known fact that ever since she was cured of her paralysis with the Goblin Alchemist's 'aid', she had never used anyone else's potions other than the Goblin's until now. She was one of those fixed, regular consumers of the Goblin – in other words, his fanatical supporter.

"...??"

Yu Sae-Jung was confused enough for her brows to narrow, but still, without saying anything she handed over a vial of potion. When he grasped the bottle, he spoke the exact same thing as before.

"This... I brewed this potion."

"...Oppa. What are you trying to say to me here? Does it look like I'm here to kid around right now?"

She of course got angry at his foolish words. She came over because he had something important to tell her, but now, it seemed like he was trying to waste her time with stupid jokes...

But Kim Sae-Jin never lost his smile and relaxedly continued on with his words.

"What do you mean, kidding around. You said that there are too many things I'm keeping from you, right? That's why I'm letting you in on the biggest secrets of mine. You must never tell anyone about this, you know?"

"Eh? What? This is no secret, it's just some nonsense..."

"As I said, the Orc Blacksmith who makes weapons, the Goblin Alchemist who brews potions – both of them are me."

" "

The entirety of Yu Sae-Jung's face crumpled. Those words were completely, utterly unbelievable. So why was this man still keeping such a serious, straight face?

"Are you telling the truth?"

"Yep."

"...You're lying."

"Fuuhut."

In the end, Kim Sae-Jin burst out in laughter. Seeing this, Yu Sae-Jung thought inwardly, I knew it, and was about to say something but then, her lips froze.

"Dear Miss Yu Sae-Jung. I crafted a Broadsword, imbued with a mighty miraculous ability that will surpass other magical enchantments in the form of the weapon growing by itself.... I'll always cheer you on, as one of Miss Yu Sae-Jung's fans."

"....Uh? Eh?!"

What he just said now was the exact contents of the letter written by the Orc Blacksmith for her.

"Was it correct? It's been a long time so my memory is a bit blurry there. Those were the parts I can remember off the top of my head."

"....Huh? No, no, wait a minute. This is..."

"You see, this weapon, I originally made this just for you. Your main weapon has always been a Broadsword, right? I even asked you what was the exact type of weapons you used while we hunted together. Can't you remember?"

Her mind blanked out in that moment. Not one thought formed inside her head. But when she looked back, things began falling into their places.

At that time, she treated it as a coincidence, but now, the voice of the Orc Blacksmith from back then... it was just way too similar to that of the man in front of her.

But most of all, on that letter written by the Orc Blacksmith, the errors in grammar were the same as...

Completely dumbstruck, she continued to stare at him without thinking of closing her wide open mouth. < 17. The Omen (3) > Fin.

Chapter 60: The Omen (4)

Kim Sae-Jin further explained afterwards, but Yu Sae-Jin, with her mind not working at all, didn't seem to understand a word he said. While frozen in a dazed expression, she replied with a short "Yes", "Ahh", "That", etc, etc.

"...H, how is that even possible?"

These words were what she could string together after pulling herself out of the lengthy confusion.

He deliberated for a short moment on how he should answer her, before settling on the broadest answer possible.

"It's thanks to my Trait."

"Whaaat? Just what kind of Trait is..."

Just what kind of Trait is that great?! Yu Sae-Jung shut her mouth while feeling slightly unfair.

Normally, a Trait was divided into two big subsections – the Completed type and the Level-Up type.

Those born with the former type of Trait, the Completed, could wield enormous power from the word go, but since the Trait could not be developed any further, the only way to grow oneself was through practise and rigorous training of one's physical body. One of the more obvious examples of this Trait was the 'Heavy Swords Mastery' of Joo Ji-Hyuk.

However, although the latter type, the Level-Up, started off on a much weaker note than the Completed type, but with lots of effort, both the Trait and one's physical self would grow. That meant there was a high possibility that in the later years, the holders of this Trait type would reach greater heights than those with the Completed type.

More than half of all the Knights, Wizards and other specialty

professions were holders of some kind of Traits and among them, it was understood that around 80% were the Completed type while the rest 20% were the Level-Up type.

But seeing that more than half of that '20%' Level-Up type Trait holders were Knights ranked higher than upper Mid Tier, or Wizards ranked B or higher, it was safe to say that this type of Trait was truly a blessing from the heavens or some such.

"...So that's how it was."

She decided that Kim Sae-Jin was the wielder of the Level-Up type Trait, even a uber-super-fraudulent version of it, and stopped short of asking him about the finer details.

She had never, ever even heard of such a world-breaking bugged Trait existing before, but whatever the case may have been, it was still taboo to inquire too deeply about another person's Trait.

"Ohhh, so you believe me now?"

Sae-Jin smiled and looked at her with eyes showing how proud he was of her. He was expecting her to doubt him at least for a little while longer and start assaulting him with more questions.

"What choice do I have? Even though it's re~ally unbelievable, since you said it's true, I have to trust you."

For some reason, Yu Sae-Jung felt content when his gentle gaze landed on her. And that's how, a deep smile began dawning on her lips as she stared back at his face.

"Yawn~, by the way, where is the break room in this place? I'm feeling way too tired... And my head is so fuzzy, it's like I'm still dreaming right now. You'll tell me more when I wake up, right?"

Yu Sae-Jung yawned out as she spoke.

"Of course."

Finding her appearance really adorable, he somehow ended up walking towards her position and started gently stroking her head.

It sure was a sudden 'skinship', but... she found his touches not too bad at all. No, it was actually quite nice.

"...Ehem."

That was why she let out a fake cough and hurriedly lowered her head. No doubt her hotly burning face was dyed in deep red, and she didn't want to show him that appearance at all.

"It's located in the basement. Come, I'll take you there."

When Sae-Jin took away his hand while saying these words, she shyly nodded her head while showing a slight disappointment.

*

And now, inside the Raven Knights Order's HQ.

Kim Yu-Rin stood before the doors to the Executive Conference room and breathed in deeply.

On the day she stubbornly and resolutely decided to go and meet Kim Sae-Jin 'alone' at the promised place – she made a deal with Chae Young-Ho and other executives.

And that was to report on the results of the two people's dinner.

It was because Kim Sae-Jin's fame had risen up way too high to call the simple dinner between him and Yu-Rin as a mere private matter anymore.

And so, today was the day she'd report on her meeting with Kim Sae-Jin last night. But there was no need for her to fret. Even though she didn't receive any concrete answers regarding the Athany doll, just like last time, Kim Sae-Jin gifted her another 'weapon purchase application' form.

"...You can do this. Yes, you can, Kim Yu-Rin! Just relax."

Yu-Rin did her best to self-hypnotise, and then carefully opened the door.

Inside the conference room, the team leaders from the teams 1 to

8 were all present and waiting. In other words, besides the beleaguered Vice Order Master who was staying at home currently with various scandals hanging over his head, and her father the Order Master who had to go and meet the President on this same day, everyone of the upper management was here.

"Oh, you're arrived."

Chae Young-Ho welcomed (?) her first. She then replied to the avalanche of greetings with a warm smile and found an empty seat for herself.

"So, what did you two talk about?"

As expected, it was Chae Young-Ho who fired the first round. He was taking secret glances at the paper in Yu-Rin's grasp. Judging by the style of the coating that was rather suspicious, he thought that she had indeed brought home something after all.

"We were able to converse regarding various topics. Out of all those, the one that left most impression on me was his future plans on how he'd improve the Athany doll."

Kim Yu-Rin deliberately spoke in a relaxed manner.

Last night, Sae-Jin told her about his plans on what he'd like to do with the doll without too much thought. What he said was that the effects of the doll should improve by at least 100% from before – obviously because the Orc Form's evolution prompting the growth in the skill 'Smithing Technique'.

"Hu-uh. Doesn't that mean it's going to be as effective as an A level Mana Spring? Even now, that one doll's effect rivals a B~C level Spring... Huh, really now."

Even if it was something Sae-Jin had spoken out carelessly, to these guys it was a priceless information. One or two executives present were even thinking of getting rid of their share of stocks belonging to those Wizards Towers mainly specialising in building Mana Springs. "Yes. And besides the Athany doll designed to aid training, he also spoke of his plans to develop the doll to new directions as well."

Encouraged by the positive reactions of the executives, Yu-Rin became more lively with her replies.

"By the way, what is that paper in your hands?"

However, Chae Young-Ho managed to cut off the flow rather abruptly. Yu-Rin ended up frowning slightly, but still, she didn't say anything else and placed the paper on the conference room table.

"It's the weapon purchase application form for the Orc's Forge, a gift from Mister Sae-Jin."

"Oho? So this is that famous application form?"

"As expected... if you have a dinner with him, then he'd gift you a weapon made by the Orc – so, it was true, indeed."

The executives near the paper Yu-Rin produced brightened up considerably and quickly swarmed around it. It was only Chae Young-Ho who carried a somewhat unhappy expression while submerged deeply in his own thoughts.

"How are you planning to utilise this form?"

"How about... well, it seems like a good idea to put this up as a prize for the person achieving the number 1 internal rankings... I'm happy with whatever works the best!!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

For her, the reactions of the gathered executives were great, but most importantly, Kim Yu-Rin found the cloudy expression of Chae Young-Ho just so wonderful to behold. So, with a bright smile blooming on her face, she spoke with full of energy.

"Later on, if there's any message you'd like to pass on to the Society's Chairman, just talk to me!! We've become re~ally friendly with each other, you see!Ah.."

As soon as she spoke, she realised her own faux pas. Actually, the mood during the meeting with him wasn't so good due to her being way too tense. Their conversations didn't flow smoothly at all, and at one point in time, she even saw Sae-Jin make a frustrated face...

"Oh! That is a relief. Nowadays, I've heard that other Knights Orders are agonising over the ways to befriend that man. As expected, our Yu-Rin is just a blessed girl. Blessed, I say."

"Uh-huh. I've always believed her to be like that, but you were different, no? Miss Yu-Rin. That old man there was getting jealous of you a month before you earned your rank of the Highest Tier."

"What nonsense are you barking out now?! And I'm still in my 40s, so who the heck is an old man...."

But seeing this lively atmosphere and the rotting face of Chae Young-Ho...

"...Ha, haha... Is, is that so?"

She just couldn't find the chance to correct her mistake.

But, she was also beginning to feel rather bitter in the corner of her mind.

While these people here devalued whatever results she brought in after going through the proverbial hell – the achievements deemed important for the real Knights – the same voices were now sincerely approving of her actions after making this one personal connection....

"You can... talk to me... at any time..."

*

"Five incidents? There were that many?"

- "Yes. As you've requested, I arrived before other Knights could and resolved all the situations. And whew, even the mobilization time is on another level altogether. Well, considering it only takes 10 minutes from Seoul to Gangwon Province, so..."

- "Wow... But wouldn't there be some problems with your body when moving that fast?"
- "It's fine if one uses Mana Barrier. But, in order to withstand this much atmospheric pressure and air resistance, I think one needs to be higher than a Mid Tier at least."

This was the openly-encroaching season of the blooming flowers – but the affairs of this planet were, as if they had a prior arrangement or something, all flowing towards a clearly bad direction.

And strangely, out of all the countless countries in this world, the Republic of Korea was having it the worst. The citizens were rightly feeling anxious at the sudden, unexplainable Monster incidents occurring as much as 31 times a month – one every day.

Unfortunately, the shifting, burning embers of the current state of things somehow fell on top of Kim Sae-Jin and Muffin. The number of people suspecting how safe it could be with Muffin had increased explosively all of a sudden.

And so, in order to change the perception of public opinion, he asked Joo Ji-Hyuk to ride on Muffin's back and to eliminate Monsters.

"So, how was the reactions of the citizens? Were they afraid?"

- "Not at all. I didn't see anyone like that, instead I even met a few who were smiling. Saying they found the new twin tail hairstyle adorable."

Just in case the ordinary citizens found Muffin scary, Sae-Jin inscribed a Magic Tattoo that emitted a pleasant smell, and on top of that, he even braided the long white hair of the Griffin into a twin ponytail. He wanted to maximise the creature's cuteness, and also since it was a female, there was that, too.

"By the way, did Muffin act in any weird way? Mister Hahn-Sung was referring to Muffin as the Satan Reincarnate or something like that."

- "Pardon? What did he mean by 'Satan', when it's this adorable... Huhuh. Maybe that guy dreamed a nightmare?"
- "...You think so, too? Looks like maybe Mister Hahn-Sung is suffering from overwork. I should hurry and hire more people."
- "Hahaha... Ah, Mister Chairman, I just received a request for an interview. What should I do?"

"You do what you think is the best. Then, let's end the call here."

- "Understood, Mister Chairman."

When the conversation with Joo Ji-Hyuk came to an end, Sae-Jin pocketed his phone and brought up his Status window.

[Name: Kim Sae-Jin]

[Age: Roughly 23 Years Old]

[Height: 185.01 cm/ Weight: 85kg]

► Status

[Physical Strength 113]

[Endurance 112]

[Agility 116]

[Energy Manipulation 46]

[Mana Affinity 36]

[Magic Strength 31]

[Luck 17]

*Time remaining for the Human Form: (300/343) minutes.

"Whew-oo."

He let out a sigh of relief.

Fortunately, his continuously-growing height stopped increasing for a week now; only his weight had changed slightly. But even that change came from one of his newly acquired Passives.

[The 'Warrior's Special Quality' (Skill Proficiency Level: F)]

- Step 1: The host's body will undergo changes to better suit a 'warrior' with the passage of time. (Current percentage of completion: 15.5%)
- The subsequent Steps will only be unlocked after the completion of 'Step 1'.

It seemed that with this 'Warrior's Special Quality' activating, he could relax somewhat about being assimilated completely into the Ebony Wolf for now.

However, there was a new, completely unexpected and somewhat related problem that had occurred in the meantime.

The culprit was a single notebook on top of his desk.

This book was a communication tool he had crafted by activating the Orc's Smithing Technique for ten minutes straight. He made a pair of them and when letters were written on the pages of one, the same letters would appear on the other one.

The reason why he made these notebooks was for the sake of security while communicating with the Mercenary's Tavern. Fearing that 'the Lycan' might act without his knowledge, he had sent one over to the Tavern more than three months ago.

"... Aaand you were trying to prosecute me up until now."

Feeling somewhat dumbfounded, he picked up the book again. On the middle of the 21st page, these words were clearly written.

[The government has sent the word out that they wish to enlist the Lycan's aid. The job is to uncover the truth behind the current incidents. The compensation is a weapon made by the Orc Blacksmith and expungement of the prior criminal records.

Looks like the government understands how much it wronged you, the Lycan, and thus is offering up these fairly substantial rewards. But, I shall leave the decision making solely up to you.

And furthermore, this notebook will be confiscated by the Special Investigation Division of Police. I've immediately tore off the pages prior to this one the moment your messages came through and burned them, but still, I must apologise for getting discovered.]

The reward was supposedly a weapon made by the Orc Blacksmith. A hollow chuckle threatened to break out of his mouth.

"Really, this is ridiculous..."

From a few weeks ago, a certain civil servant, claiming to be the Deputy Commissioner of some government entity, came every two days to sincerely beg him for the sale of an Athany doll. He said that it'd be used purely for the diplomatic purposes between countries.

Sae-Jin was going to ignore the man, but since it was allegedly for a good cause so, while saying an Athany doll was impossible, he handed over the Orc's weapon application form instead.

'And they are using what I gave them right here.'

Obviously they had no idea that Kim Sae-Jin and the Lycan was the same person, but still, this was definitely not right, wasn't it? This wasn't diplomacy, after all.

"....Fuu."

Sighing out grandly, Sae-Jin began jotting down the words of refusal on the pages of the notebook. Since he was feeling somewhat wronged as well, he also deliberately showed off a bit of arrogance and bravado.

[You turned me into a criminal in a blink of an eye, and now you're asking for an assistance, which leaves me quite speechless. In all honesty, I've already seen through to the bottom of these incidents as well as the ringleader behind them. But how can a

criminal solve these crimes?]

He then stopped here. As he was trying to hide his handwriting, he was writing with his left hand and that wasn't easy at all. Of course, thanks to the skill 'Goblin's Craftsmanship', his left hand writing was almost indistinguishable from regular people's writings.

[And that is why, before my so-called criminal records are expunged, as well as the personal apology issued by that tiger woman, Chief Yu Baek-Song of the Special Investigation Division, I plan to sit tight on what I have discovered for myself.]

*

At that moment Kim Sae-Jin wrote these words down...

Kwaaaaang-!!!

The desk where the notebook was resting on became nothing more than sawdust under the fist of a certain woman.

"Eu ah!!!"

"Mommy!!"

With the screams coming off the surrounding people, all gazes gathered on this particular woman.

The ferocious and violent personality resembling the real tiger – but portrayed as the guardian of the Korean nation by the media; and perhaps this world's most two-faced woman...

"Haa, a tiger?! That measly, worthless son of a bi*ch dares to..?"

The world's only living 'Divine Beast' type Soo-in, Yu Baek-Song. She just couldn't hold back her anger at those sudden words of insults. Her trembling eyelashes and deeply frowning face illustrated the level of anger she was feeling right this moment.

"Wow. I, I seriously feel like I'll go mad. A tiger?!"

She hated the word 'tiger' with passion. As she was a 'White

Tiger', she had this irrational obsession that caused her to zealously separate herself from the lowly common garden-variety tigers.

"Kheuaaaang!"

Yu Baek-Song let out an animalistic roar. Of course, she was still a 'human', and on top of that, a woman with a... somewhat small physique so it didn't sound at all threatening, however. If anything, one could even call it rather adorable.

But she did this contrived and unnatural act regardless, whenever she became beyond incensed with anger.

The excuse was that it was the expression of the pride at being a 1st gen. Soo-in and the resulting animalistic tendencies or some such.

"Kheuang!! Kheuaaang!!"

Thanks to this scene, all the people present here had to do their very best to suppress their rising laughter.

<17. The Omen (4) > Fin.

Chapter 61: The Vicious Cycle (1)

Reversing of the public sentiment was a success. Joo Ji-Hyuk ended up earning the nickname of the 'Griffin Knight', and Muffin even performed an interview with a reporter.

The killer smile of Muffin that spread out to all social media in real time was adorable enough to give people heart attacks and that's how she temporarily got to 'own' the Internet.

But quite strangely, only Jo Hahn-Sung gritted his teeth and called Muffin the Satan Reincarnate or some such, but Sae-Jin didn't pay too much mind to it.

As Muffin became famous, inquiries from Knights and Knights Orders throughout the world rushed in like tsunami waves via the Society's home page.

A Chinese Knights Order even suggested that Sae-Jin tame the Monsters with the eggs they would bring in for a cool fee of post-tax \$180 million.

Well, it seemed like the romantic ideals of Knights were the same regardless of where they were from.

Plus, riding on a Griffin wasn't just a simple romantic dream for Knights, either. After all, imagine a Knight astride a Griffin, tearing through the sky – wasn't that just the coolest sight ever? In other words, it was a wonderful marketing opportunity, right there.

Whatever the case may have been, thanks to this thing with the Griffin, Kim Sae-Jin's name had begun to spread around the world for real – from a humble, regular citizen of a small country, to the leader of the Society that had become the focus of the world.

As an evidence of his fame, the number of his SNS followers had blitzed past 1 million and was closing in on the 2 million mark quite rapidly. And just last week, the Society's class saw another

advancement, this time to C+... In other words, things have gotten pretty d**n nice for Sae-Jin lately. (TL: the final line of this paragraph confused me like no other – the literal TL would have meant that there was no need for him to do more, but that didn't seem quite correct so I had to do some research online as well as to ask around, and what I TLed here was the result of that research – but still, I'm not 100% sure if that's what the author was trying to say in the first place.)

"...I also want to ride one."

Currently, inside the Chairman's office located in The Monster's building. There was yet another Knight present here who wanted her own Griffin.

Yu Sae-Jung was 'gently' staring at Sae-Jin's face as he was doing some paperwork while hunched over his desk. Her large and sparkling eyes contained an earnest desire within.

"I'm sorry, but you can't. You're still a low Mid Tier. Didn't you hear what Joo Ji-Hyuk said before?"

"Come on, Oppa. A Knight's Tier isn't the true reflection of her abilities, you know? I mean, it's like, since the rank advancement exams take place only twice a year, sometimes people rank up slower than compared to their capabilities. Me, I can do this no problem, you know?!"

She 'came to work' to the Society's HQ instead of her own Dawn Order. Apparently, her superiors easily granted her the permission when she said she'd be coming here to ride on a Griffin.

"Not going to happen."

"....Fuu."

But Sae-Jin firmly refused her, causing her cheeks to puff up in annoyance and she started pounding on the desk with her palm.

"Everyday, you're always favouring Knight Ji-Hyuk only... Oppa, you into guys?"

"What the?! No, I'm not."

"Then why do you hate me so much?!"

After spitting out her words, she then observed changes in Sae-Jin's mood for a bit. However, he was still 'toiling' away with his paperwork.

"...Pretending to work hard only in situations like this..."

Usually, he'd dump all the work to his subordinates, anyways.

Still pouting, Yu Sae-Jung tenaciously stuck around Sae-Jin's office.

The patience, obsession, and the tenacity possessed by the precious daughter of the Chaebol household was not to be underestimated. 10 minutes, 20 minutes, and then 30 minutes... Time flowed quickly, but all she did was simply stare at Sae-Jin without giving up.

Of course, as far as time was concerned, Sae-Jin would always be in a disadvantage; before he knew it, his legs were trembling ever so slightly.

"Alright, then, let's do it this way."

In the end, Sae-Jin had to concede first. When he got up from his seat while putting on a jacket, those excessively sparkling lights came back in full force in her eyes.

"Bring me a Griffin egg."

"Eh?"

The documents he was pouring over just now was actually information regarding Griffin eggs. In the past, records showed that five to six eggs appeared on auctions throughout the year, but nowadays, not one have, so far. And the financial department head Yu Dohng also mentioned that even if one did appear, it should commence a sky-high price anyways.

So, he was thinking that, even if it was the might of the Dawn,

finding one would take some time, and Yu Sae-Jung would no doubt have become a Mid Tier by then.

"Then I'll make sure you can ride on one. Cool?"

He quickly added these words and then lightly patted Yu Sae-Jung's head once before hurrying outside.

"I've got things to take care of, so I'll get going first."

Sae-Jin left like that. And with a blank face, Yu Sae-Jung's eyes chased after his back, visible through the open gap of the doors.

"...Whew-oo..."

Then suddenly, she let out a long sigh. Riding on a Griffin – certainly, that would be nice. But that was only a part of the reason why she was here.

'I wanted to ask him out for lunch...'

Was he really too dense to notice, or did he really not like her that much? While hiding a disappointed and melancholic heart, she trudged towards the restaurant she had made a reservation with.

*

It was late at night.

A Goblin that was lying on a bed tossing and turning, abruptly opened his eyes. From his two bloodshot eyes, a strange aura was oozing out.

"Fuu..."

Scanning the surroundings for a moment or two, the Goblin let out a long sigh before suddenly morphing into a human being.

"...It's happening again."

Kim Sae-Jin dazedly muttered out. The clock said 2:30 AM.

Roughly a month after acquiring the Orc Great Warrior Form, he was currently suffering from various negative side effects.

First of all, it became impossible to enjoy a relaxing night's sleep anymore. The vitality of the Orc residing within him did not permit things it did not agree with, such as lying down for more than three hours straight.

This much was fine. With his body so sturdy and strong, there would be more than enough stamina for the whole day even with minimal amount of sleep.

The real big problem was the explosive increase of his base instincts and desires, such as gluttony and lust, as well as his aggressive tendencies for violence and confrontation.

Against the strong, he'd give his everything in a challenge, but against the weak, a deserved domination and trampling. Craving to be the true victor, but the defeated would be ruthlessly humiliated and stepped on. (To editor: Welp. I tried, but this is how the raw is like. How should I fix this?!)

Now that he threw away the identity of the Werewolf, Orc's basic instincts and racial tendencies were spreading all over him.

"...D**n it."

Sae-Jin held his head in distress.

Just what kind of a vicious cycle was this? He chased so hard after his evolution in order to overcome the threat of losing his ego; but now, he simply had no avenue to soothe his powerfully surging instincts.

While gazing at the cold white light of the full moon permeating through the curtains, he slowly got up from his bed. There would be no change whatsoever by sitting on his a*s doing nothing, after all.

Whatever the case may be, he just had to work harder.

The conditions of his evolutions couldn't simply be satisfied by

hunting Monsters. That was why, if at all possible, he had to try out everything. For now, there was no other way but to try out any old random things.

"...Heuk... Heu, euuuk..."

Sae-Jin was thinking, would he be able to evolve somehow, if he killed the Knight crawling in front of him? No, that was too much, so maybe he should just break a leg or two, instead...

'As long as I don't kill...'

He could assist the victim with the best potion brewed by the Goblin Alchemist.

He then walked in heavy steps towards the female Knight and grabbed her by her slender waist. The huge hand of the Werewolf was enough to pick her up off the ground.

"Let... let go, let me go..."

When he saw the terror-stricken face of the female Knight, from deep inside of him a powerful sense of enjoyment bubbled up to the front. So, the Wolf's long tongue reached out and licked her face.

"Kkyahk!!"

Her terrified screams stabbed into his ears. It sure was a loud sound for the Wolf with a very sensitive hearing ability, and fortunately, Sae-Jin could recover some of his humanity from that scream.

"Ah..."

He turned his gaze towards the sky. The dawn's sky with the full moon high up was dyed in the deep shades of navy blue.

That was it, the full moon. No doubt, the cause for this crisis was the Werewolf's instincts enhanced by the full moon getting all tangled up with the Orc's desires.

"SFX for a child-like sobbing"

It was then, the Knight captured within his hand began crying like a child.

Only then did Sae-Jin check who she was while tilting his head.

And she was someone he had been somewhat acquainted with before, the girl who lost to Yu Sae-Jung at the Knights Duel, Jung Eun-Ji.

Why was the female Knight famous even in the entertainment industry out hunting during these dangerous hours?

"...Khrrrng."

From the jaws of the Wolf, a strange and murky, low frequency growl came out. Taking this as a sign of the creature attacking her, Jung Eun-Ji squeezed her eyes shut. But what happened next was quite confusing to her, to say the least.

'Come back when you get stronger.'

He freed her while carrying a mischievous grin. Of course, to her eyes it was one of the most terrifying expressions she'd ever seen.

SFX for thudding footsteps

And then, walking with heavy steps, he headed off elsewhere.

Her face all messed up with snot and tears, Jung Eun-Ji sank to the ground powerlessly and continued to stare at the back of the departing Werewolf silently.

*

Sae-Jin continued to walk through the forest for a while longer after that, before sensing a strange energy. Even from this great distance, he could sense that nearly imperceptible evil energy with black and crimson colours blending together to give off a seriously bad vibe.

As if he was a moth drawn by the light, he approached it and found a stone that seemingly looked as innocuous as it could get. There was no need for him to wonder what this thing was for, as...

[A Summoning Rock]

[An Installation-Type Portal]

[Remaining number of usages: 20/24]

- A stone made by an unknown individual for summoning purposes. 24 times a day, Monsters within its effective area will be transferred to the specified area.
 - It'll break once the number of usages run out.

...As he possessed a leveled-up Passive that allowed him to take a peek at the information of things other than weapons.

Sae-Jin immediately figured it out the moment he read the alert window.

This was the culprit of all those Monster incidents happening throughout the country until now. No, the real culprit was something else. The alert window said this thing was made by an unknown individual, after all.

'But what an unexpected harvest.'

For now, Sae-Jin sliced apart this Summoning Rock and stopped its operation.

*

– It is now known that Knight Jung Eun-Ji is complaining about the mental trauma suffered at the hands of the Werewolf while being treated in the private medical facility......

Two days later, after being seen as a big scoop, the stories related to Jung Eun-Ji exploded out into the open.

Sae-Jin definitely didn't give her any external wounds. The only thing he did was to break her weapon, that was all.

But seeing all that exaggerated reactions coming from the news, the various publications and even from the netizens, clearly the identity of the victim played the biggest role of all, it seemed. - Although experts concur that this Werewolf has been active within the Monster field for quite some time, they are suspecting that there might be some type of connection between it and the Monster-related attacks that have been occurring frequently.

SFX for papers rustling

As Sae-Jin was paying attention to the news broadcast on the television, out of the blue, he could hear the sound of something being written inside the desk's drawer.

That was an indication of someone writing on the communication notebook. So, he pulled the book out from the drawer.

[It is simply too difficult to believe you when you claim to have seen through the scheme and the culprit behind the current incidents. If you can prove this, then we're more than willing to follow through on all of your demands.]

It was a message from the Special Investigation Division after a long time had passed by.

The truth of these incidents... As he did find something two days ago by sheer good timing, he picked up his pen with certain amount of confidence.

[Haven't you ever wondered why the number of Monsters within the Monster field had decreased? Also, have you heard of an item called "Summoning Rock" before? I already have figured out everything. But unless you prepare a suitable reward, I refuse to reply further after this.]

In all honesty, it wasn't because he was refusing to – he couldn't, even if he wanted to. But still, he passed on everything he knew this way. He found negotiating like this when many innocent people were suffering out there rather uncomfortable after all.

And when he realised this uncomfortable feeling within his mind, he somehow felt happy as well, knowing that it was the evidence of him not being assimilated to either the Orc or the Wolf Form.

SFX for papers rustling

Even though replies were hastily being written after his own words. Sae-Jin coolly closed the notebook.

June 21st.

The longest day in the year, and the true beginning of the Summer.

[The Society that's expanding internationally, The Monster; over 300 Knights Orders gather for the demonstration of the Athany 2.0...]

[The Orc's 'Whip Sword', the revolutionary weapon that can bend its blade like a whip when Mana is injected – certified as a 5th rank Branded Goods. The reasons why the Orc's work isn't from luck or coincidence:...]

[The Goblin Alchemist produces a high grade potion once more; the Yoseon Alchemy House is now being referred to as the Goblin House.]

"Our Society is doing really well right now, isn't it? No wait, isn't it Oppa who's doing really well?"

After finishing up with her work, Yu Sae-Jung showed up in Sae-Jin's office just like before. This time, he was reading a newspaper; he chuckled slightly and got up to leave.

"Don't you have to go to school?"

"Well, no, I'm admitted to a university already. Meaning, it's the same thing as me being an official adult – no, I am an adult now. I even got the driving licence, too!!"

Yu Sae-Jung seemed to be in an especially good mood. Today was actually the day she was going to have lunch with him. She even

wore a sleek, fancy outfit and a pair of high heels for the occasion.

"Is that so? Well then, shall we get going?"

While speaking, Kim Sae-Jin smoothly wrapped his arm around her shoulders. At this subtle contact, Yu Sae-Jung was stunned slightly. But she could only swallow down her saliva. Without saying much, she naturally followed his lead.

"So, where would you like to go?"

"Mm? Oh, right. I made reservations, but it's fine to go where Oppa wishes to go."

"No, it's alright. Let's go to the reserved place."

< 18. The Vicious Cycle (1) > Fin.

Chapter 62: The Vicious Cycle (2)

With Kim Sae-Jin riding shotgun, Yu Sae-Jung drove the car by herself to the restaurant located within the city limits of Gangwon Province. (TL: The name of the city isn't specified in the raw.)

She drove quickly for 10 minutes, before arriving at their destination.

"We're here."

"Oh. You're pretty good at driving."

Her skills behind the wheel, whether it was driving or parking, was so perfect it made him exclaim out in admiration. Honestly speaking, at first, he got so nervous, he had to pull the seat belt as tightly as possible...

"Obviously. I'm good at everything, you know."

What she said could've been seen as a jinx, but he couldn't help but find her brightly-smiling face simply endearing.

"Eu-ssya."

She got off the car first, then hurriedly walked over to the passenger side and opened the door for him. Sae-Jin chuckled slightly as he exited the car, thinking, isn't a man supposed to do that for a lady instead?

And so, the two of them approached the restaurant's entrance.

Yu Sae-Jung continuously searched for the right opportunity to link their arms together, but simply couldn't work up the courage to go for it.

And so, her body continued to flinch this way and that while still searching for that right timing – but, before that could happen, the Maître D' had already approached them. Feeling genuinely bummed out, she began to resent the waiter in her mind.

"Have you made reservations?"

"Yes, yesterday. Under 'Yu Sae-Jung', for two."

The restaurant she had made reservations with, the "Dinner In Angel", was so famous for its wonderful flavour and classy atmosphere, it operated on the reservation basis only. As far as Sae-Jin knew, a regular Joe would have to make a reservation a month in advance for his spot – that's how famous it was. (TL: that's the name of the restaurant in the raw. I didn't mess it up.)

"Of course. Please follow me."

Sae-Jin and Yu Sae-Jung followed the Maître D's guidance and entered the restaurant's interior.

The melody of a classical music number gently floated in the air; one could tell that the décor was very expensive, even at a casual glance. And the patrons here were all someone Sae-Jin thought he might recognize from somewhere.

His facial expression became slightly stunned as he discovered celebrities he saw often in TV shows, as well as famous Knights and Wizards here.

"This is your reserved table."

The place they were guided to – the table Yu Sae-Jung had reserved – was located in the best spot next to the windows where one could see the panoramic view of the cityscape below.

Kim Sae-Jin still felt out of place in such a luxurious restaurant, but as expected of a gold spoon, Yu Sae-Jung was just fine. She placed her order in a relaxed manner and then shifted her gaze towards Sae-Jin, who was still scanning the other diners around them.

"It's going to taste great."

As she spoke, a brilliant smile was spreading on her face.

"I think so, too."

"Hehe. Right?"

Shortly after, their food arrived. Their meal started off with soup, then moved onto tiny little steaks, followed by slightly bigger steaks, etc, etc.

They chatted away while savouring the food.

Even though Sae-Jin spoke about things that just randomly popped into his head, the big smile on Yu Sae-Jung's face showed no sign of disappearing. At one point, she even laughed out too loudly and drew in the attention of the surroundings.

And so, over 40 minutes had gone past; the meal came to an end just as Sae-Jin was beginning to feel nervous about the time idling away.

"Let's get going."

He got up from his seat first. Yu Sae-Jung also got up, but her expression was somewhat regretful at the same time. Right away, Sae-Jin quickly ran towards the counter. He was trying to pay for the meal, but unfortunately for him, there was no need to do that in the first place.

"This restaurant is owned by the Dawn Corporation, and as such, Miss Yu Sae-Jung and her fellow patron is exempt from paying." (Waiter)

"...Oh. Is that right?"

As Sae-Jin blankly nodded his head, a sonorous voice could be heard from his back.

"Did you hear that? Maybe Oppa got too used to it and keeps on forgetting it, but I am that kind of a woman, you know~."

She puffed her chest out and tried to sound imposing and all.

It was then, the expression of the waiter behind the counter became a little strange. Obviously, it was not her first time dining in this restaurant. She had brought along other Knights from the Dawn Order, saying they were her colleagues and stuff like that. But her expressions now and back then were completely on the opposite side of the spectrum. It was enough to make the waiter wonder if she was the same person or not.

She did not smile at all back then, ditto for the coy facial expression.

Her rigid lips were only used for consuming her food, and it was quite obvious from her expressions just how much she wanted to go home as soon as possible.

"...Is she flirting with him?"

That notion sounded totally nonsensical. Just what would make Yu Sae-Jung flirt like that with another person?

Of course, the waiter knew the guy next to her as he'd heard and saw him before.

Kim Sae-Jin.

Although he hadn't yet made an official appearance on TV, but still, he was a man the attentions of the public was focused on, as evidenced by his name being mentioned at least once every day in every television programme there was, even including those variety shows.

'But they do look good together.'

The waiter silently stared at the departing backs of Sae-Jin and Yu Sae-Jung while feeling a sense of emptiness.

"Oppa, um, since there's some time left, so... how about we catch a movie?"

As they stepped out of the restaurant, Yu Sae-Jung carefully asked him.

"Uh? Oh... That.... I, uh, I'm not really into movies."

He replied while scratching the back of his neck. Movies... Well, he never really had any luck with such leisure activities before but ever since his Trait awakened, it had become totally impossible now.

"Ah, if that's the case, then what about those machines where you win plush toys? There are loads of them around here."

She walked alongside him and tried to lead him towards the 'next' thing. She really didn't want to end today's meeting with only a single lunch together.

However, his situation didn't permit that.

"Even that is, still...."

"T, then, why don't we go to a cafe and just talk? You see, after today, we won't be able to see each other for a few weeks... You heard, right? The order for the emergency stand-by."

Anxiety could be heard in Yu Sae-Jung's voice. But there was nothing he could do. After sighing out deeply, he patted her head and spoke.

"I'm sorry. Let's just head home for today."

""

Sae-Jung's gaze remained directed to the floor without saying a single word for a while.

But that didn't last for long. As if nothing had happened, she smiled brightly and replied to him in a lively manner.

"Yeah, well. I guess it can't be helped. By the way, Oppa, you know you missed a big chance today, right?"

She quickly walked towards the car and entered it – but Sae-Jin stood there momentarily after sensing her voice tremble.

He was left utterly frustrated and bitter. The meaning behind the time limit for his Human Form was that he wouldn't be able to develop a deep relationship with another person. He wasn't sure since when Yu Sae-Jung developed such feelings for him, but...

"What are you doing? I'll drive you back to your house."

She lowered the driver's side window and shouted at him. He trudged to the passenger side and entered the car. Right away, the engine roared into life, and she expertly manoeuvred out of the parking lot.

"...Did you enjoy the food?"

Sae-Jung tried to engage in small talk as if everything was fine, but it was plain to see that she was not okay while sitting behind the wheel. He felt so apologetic towards her, seeing her rigid face with a forced smile on it.

*

After that day, Sae-Jin immersed himself even deeper in his evolution.

Until the night fell, he really tried pretty much all sorts of things while utilising the Wolf Form, and even resorting to the Forms of the Goblin and Athany.

However, while his evolution seemed so far away still, an official decree for his subjugation was issued. It was called – [The subjugation order for the black-coloured Werewolf found between the low Mid and upper Mid Tier hunting grounds.]

The problem came from the fact that, while he still didn't kill anyone just like when he was the Demon Orc, his much stronger bestial tendencies ended up causing various psychological issues to his victims.

His Skill 'Predator' was active during all Forms but since it was acquired after he became the Werewolf, so naturally, its effects were the strongest when he was in the Wolf Form. On top of that, there were times when he couldn't properly control his instincts at all...

Jung Eun-Ji, who had suffered the hardest, was still confined to the hospital room and besides her, twenty more Knights were suffering from lighter psychological traumas, which then precipitated the government and the Knights Orders placing a bounty on his head and issue that subjugation decree.

And that's how, the fame of the Werewolf, once referred to as the Guardian of the Monster field, had been replaced by infamy.

SFX for claws tearing through stuff

The lightning-fast claws of the Wolf tore through a Knight's armour. A shrill scream reverberated throughout the mountain side.

Today's opponent was a four-men hunting party comprised of Mid Tier Knights from the Raven Order.

As if the members of this team had worked together for long time, their cooperation, individual stamina management, as well as their abilities left nothing to be desired.

But the reality was, there was just too wide a gap of strength between them and the Werewolf, since there were five Branded Goods-level items stored in him via Spiritualisation, currently level B-.

[Stealth, Level C]

[Improved Striking Power, Level B]

[Increased Intelligence, Level C]

[Material Destruction, Level C]

[Light Refraction, Level B]

The most significant bit was the last one, 'Light Refraction'. In a close-quarter battle involving bladed weapons, the one of the most important part was correctly judging the distance between oneself and the enemy. But this 'Light Refraction' made the concept of correct distance pretty much irrelevant.

The claws definitely aimed towards the lower torso, but the resulting terrible wound appeared on the upper part; or, the claw swung from a distance would twist around quite strangely before

arriving right in front of the target's nostrils in the blink of an eye.

On top of this, the Wolf's Claws had leveled up over and over again until they rivaled adamantium in hardness alone. Dealing with each of the slashes from these claws was the same as a brush with death.

"Kkheu... heuk."

And so, these four Knights were swept away by the Wolf's unconventional attacks. To these Knights ranked around Mid Tier or lower, they just didn't have much experience in unpredictable battle situations. Sae-Jin in the Wolf Form was just too tall a wall for them to climb.

Sae-Jin fell into a dilemma while seeing the four heavily bleeding Knights grovelling on the ground.

Did he really need to take a human life, or at least cut off a limb or something, to evolve? If that was the case, then... Then...

"Kkhrnng."

However, he quickly distanced himself from the fallen Knights and ran.

Kim Sae-Jin was a human, not a Monster.

In the case if the condition for his evolution really required him to take a human life, then he'd never accept it. Because, that act alone would push him further away from being 'human'.

*

Next day.

Sae-Jin, accompanied by Joo Ji-Hyuk, was heading towards a hospital fairly early in the morning.

"You wished to see Miss Jung Eun-Ji? She's not..." (Nurse)

"My name is Joo Ji-Hyuk. Eun-Ji should feel okay around me. I also got the permission from the Order as well, since I'm here to

treat her."

The reason was Jung Eun-Ji.

Even if he couldn't help it as the Wolf's instincts had taken over back then, his conscience made him feel responsible after seeing her going through so much for the past month or so. And since his Wolf Form was the cause of her distress, there was a good chance that he also possessed the means to cure her.

"By the way, why Eun-Ji, suddenly....?"

Joo Ji-Hyuk asked carefully as they headed towards one of those single-bed patient rooms.

"Ah, that... I am Miss Eun-Ji's fan, you see. That's why I even brought the Goblin's potion along as well."

Although Jung Eun-Ji was nominally a Knight, she also actively participated in the entertainment industry as well, which meant that she had quite a fan base – so it was not a strange excuse to make.

"Uht, eh? The Goblin, you mean the Goblin Alchemist?"

However, Joo Ji-Hyuk was more interested in the Goblin Alchemist instead of Sae-Jin allegedly being Jung Eun-Ji's fan.

But that was par for the course, really. Since the Goblin Alchemist was being seen as some sort of religion in the world of potion making by the so-called 'mud spoon' Knights as well as regular citizens going through tough financial situations.

It was a well known fact that making recovery potions graded upper Mid or High was far more profitable. But disregarding that, he was busy making low Mid grade potions for sale at a low price. Even more, he maintained the rule of one potion per person when selling them.

And so, the Goblin was currently being praised that bordered on reverence as the ideal example of 'Noblesse Oblige'.

Of course, the reality was slightly different.

The low Mid grade potions he 'brewed' wasn't even a proper potion to begin with. It was actually saliva from the Athany Form. The nature of the moisture within the Athany Form was changed to mimic potions and then was discharged – in other words, it was his spit.

As he could produce over 100 litres of spit a day quite easily, he couldn't in good conscience sell that with a high price tag, so that was the reason for the low cost. And he only set the rule of one potion per person because he didn't like those people that acted like scalpers and resold his wares.

"Yes, it is that alchemist."

Tting~

While he spoke, the elevator had arrived at the top floor already.

< 18. The Vicious Cycle (2) > Fin.

Chapter 63: The Vicious Cycle (3)

Jung Eun-Ji's state was unexpectedly serious. Her face was haggard and the complexion, pale. And there were deep, dark circles below her eyes. As if she was lost within the confines of fear, her body continued to tremble, and she was even scared of making eye contacts.

"...Whew."

Joo Ji-Hyuk did his very best to converse with her but it proved to be difficult in the end. When he shook his head as if to indicate that he was about to give up, Kim Sae-Jin let out a bitter sigh.

"Mister Ji-Hyuk. Can you step outside for a second, please?"

"Eh? Oh... Of course."

Joo Ji-Hyuk left the hospital room without suspecting a thing. Sae-Jin stared at Jung Eun-Ji for a bit longer, before activating the Eyes of the Wolf.

As he thought, he could see some kind of an aura.

The deep blackish-red 'energy' oozing out of every pore in her – the intense hue and the concentration of it seemed to show how severe her condition was.

First, he brought out a potion with the effects of a sedative. Obviously, this would not cure her, but it should help her get some much needed peaceful sleep. He was planning to treat her while she slept.

"Miss Eun-Ji?"

She trembled even more when he suddenly called out her name. Her head slowly raised up.

"Please take this."

When comparing the odour from the Wolf Form and his Human Form, the former was thicker and stronger so one would be hard pressed to think they were from the same source. But there was some similarity there still.

She couldn't even dare to refuse him, and with quaking hands, received the potion.

"Drink it."

Jung Eun-Ji wordlessly drank it.

And precisely one minute later, she passed out on the bed.

After confirming that she was out cold for good, he extended his claws. Then, he slashed lightly at the bad 'energy' rising up from her body. And when he did that, the gently dancing aura began to coagulate around his claws as if it had finally found its owner.

"...What the?"

He was slightly taken back at this unexpected development. He was thinking that aura would be sliced apart just like before, so why....

However, the contents of the alert window rising up were even more absurd in nature.

[The Skill 'Dark Energy Link' has been generated.]

[Dark Energy Link]

- Obedience through terror and fear.
- Whenever the 'ruler' wants, he can cause the emotions of terror and fear in the 'ruled subjects'.
- The 'ruled subjects' will feel terror and fear when trying to refuse the 'ruler's' orders, requests and/or suggestions. However, the 'ruled subjects' will not be aware of the effects of the Link.
- The 'ruler' can sever the Link at any time. However, if he wishes to reconnect the Link, he must go through the same process as before.

[After creating the Link with 17 humans and then by maintaining

them successfully, the host will evolve into 'Lycanthrope'.]

He ended up receiving the clues to becoming a Lycanthrope quite unexpectedly.

He dazedly studied the alert window. Definitely, that dark and red energy coming off her had vanished. But seeing those words written on the alert window... Heck, wasn't this pretty similar to a master and slave relationship?!

"Soft moaning"

Jung Eun-Ji suddenly shifted her body slightly. Her frowning face had already reverted back into the relaxed, emotionless one, and her body wasn't trembling anymore. Even her breathing had become calm, resembling that of a young sleeping child.

Whatever the case may have been, it was true that his 'treatment' was complete. So, he hurriedly escaped from the hospital room.

Joo Ji-Hyuk was leaning against the wall while waiting for him. When he approached, Sae-Jin spat out quickly and headed towards the elevator.

"I think she'll be fine from now on. But Mister Ji-Hyuk, if and when she wakes up and starts saying strange things, please, you must call me first before anyone else."

"Eh?"

"...Please, I'm begging you here!!"

Joo Ji-Hyuk dumbfoundedly stared at Sae-Jin's back before entering Eun-Ji's room while scratching the back of his neck.

And around three hours later, the call from Joo Ji-Hyuk did indeed come.

The contents were simple enough. Jung Eun-Ji had recovered completely from the trauma after ingesting that potion, so she had requested him to send her thanks to Sae-Jin.

"...Is this that thing about the subject not being aware of the skill's effects?"

Sae-Jin scratched his cheek slightly while looking at his SNS profile. Jung Eun-Ji had uploaded a photo of her brightly smiling face and a lengthy message there.

[The Monster Chairman #KimSaeJin came to visit me personally. With a potion brewed by #GoblinAlchemist. I'm recovered now thanks to this potion... But he left before I woke up, and I have no other way of showing how grateful I am other than this one. The idiot Knight #JooJiHyuk said that #KimSaeJin is a fan of mine... Please call me anytime!]

'What a relief.'

He pressed the 'Like' button to show that he had received her message while not giving the matter too much thought.

And about one hour later – news articles regarding the supposed relationship between Sae-Jin and Jung Eun-Ji exploded out into the Internet, and Yu Sae-Jung – whom he thought wouldn't call him for the next few weeks – phoned him first while gritting her teeth like crazy.

On this day, Sae-Jin finally understood what it was like to lead the life of a celebrity.

There were no real benefits of getting famous; instead, there was only the pretty useless handicap of having one's life become more complicated.

*

Afterwards, Sae-Jin went around doing slightly cowardly things.

He assumed the Werewolf form, and attacked Knights ranked lower than low Mid Tier, causing them to suffer psychological shocks. Knights with ranks higher than low Mid Tier possessed stronger mental resistance and thus forming a Link with them was not possible.

And he'd go and see them under the pretext of helping them, all the while scheming to form the Link, which would then take him one step closer to his evolution.

During this process, the fame of both Sae-Jin and the Goblin Alchemist rose up higher and higher, while the infamy of the Werewolf also soared high enough to pierce the heavens.

[The assault on Knights and Hunters by the Werewolf occurs once more today.]

[The thug of the Monster field; how long do we need to witness this?]

[The ineptitude of the Knights who can't even deal with a single Monster is finally revealed for all to see.]

Even the media took issues with the Werewolf, calling it cowardly but intelligent Monster that avoided the strong while terrorising the weaklings.

Before long, the Werewolf became the 'face' of evil, and Knights ranked upper Mid and High Tier began moving to subjugate it.

Thanks to this development, Sae-Jin unfortunately had to stop after creating Links with only ten people.

And so, time continued to flow – and now, it was 13th of August.

On this sweltering Summer day heat, the planned product demonstration of The Monster opened up on an auditorium in Gangwon Province.

The central aim for this event was to advertise the Athany doll version 2.0, which now came with effects improved enough to replace a Mana Spring. Over three thousand Knights and reporters from all over the globe showed up for this demonstration.

Since this number exceeded the capacity of the auditorium, the remaining five hundred or so people had to view the event through the giant monitor set up outside the venue itself.

The emcee for the event was Jo Hahn-Sung but the role of introducing the Athany doll 2.0 was entrusted to Kim Sae-Jin.

Initially, he was really worried – but it unexpectedly ended without him getting jittery. Maybe, it was an obvious result since all he had to do was to step up for less than ten minutes and the things he had to say wasn't a lot either.

He simply walked up to the stage while holding a doll even he found absolutely cute, and then...

"Well, first of all. All the Knights and Wizards present here, please sense the Mana coming off this doll of Athany."

After speaking up to here, he waited until the Knights and Wizards become stunned by the vividly flowing currents of Mana and then he 'suggested' the estimated value of the doll that even a layman could understand.

With that over and done with, the rest was left up to the audience members. The Knights spat out exaggerated words of admiration and praise in honest shock, while Wizards' faces carried deep frowns of jealousy – and the fingers of the reporters pounded on their notebooks as if to break them into pieces or something.

And into this powder keg, he threw in one more spark of fire.

"In three months' time, we are planning to release another invention besides the Athany doll to the market – a special item that contains the essence of The Monster. Please look forward to it."

The auditorium descended into a chaotic arena of fervor as he quickly stepped into the backstage.

"Was there really a need to do a live broadcast like this...? Maybe I should reprimand the marketing department later on."

Watching the footage coming out of the TV, an embarrassed smile spread on Sae-Jin's face.

"Eh? No, I don't think you have to do something like that. Maybe because your height has grown taller, you looked really good up on the stage, you know? I mean, really, really cool. If I was a bit younger, I'd have fallen for you already~"

While taking a cute little bite at an apple, Hazeline spoke.

Today, she had come to see Sae-Jin about a problem regarding debt. However, this time she was here as the lendee, not a lender. In other words, she came to borrow some money for the Alchemy House expansion plan.

The amount was nearly \$4.5 million US, but since Sae-Jin owed her for her generous support back then, he didn't even hesitate in lending this money. That was probably why she was flirting (?) with him like this with a huge smile on her face.

"Haha... Is that right?"

"Of course~ Ah, right. By the way, one Athany doll 2.0 should go for at least around \$50 million so, doesn't that mean Mister Sae-Jin is loaded now?"

Her voice was filled to the brim with envy.

"Ahaha... Actually, I don't have much in my bank account. You see, I'm busy purchasing land right now."

"Land? But why?"

"Well. The financial and the planning departments gave me an advice. By buying up the land between the Society's building and the Yoseon Alchemy House, it would aid in the Society's expansion in the future."

Hazeline dazedly calculated the distance between here and her Alchemy House – then her jaws dropped to the floor while carrying a shocked expression.

"From here to there?! Wouldn't that cost a fortune? Even if the land price in Gangwon Province has hit rock bottom because of all

the Monster incidents..."

"I've already acquired about the half of the area. The pricing on the Orc's weapons has gone up by a lot, you see."

Hazeline blankly gazed at him, before swallowing her saliva and did a fake cough. And then, she carefully opened her mouth.

"Ah~ The economy is in the doldrums lately. Maybe I should increase the rent~~? Mister S, Sa, Sae-Jin, what do you think?"

It was a well-known fact that the building the Orc's Forge was located in belonged to Hazeline.

Her appearance in that moment was unbelievably cute quite unlike her real age of 30-ish; and it was enough to momentarily rouse the instinctive lust in him.

"...Ah, hahaha..."

He suppressed his rising instincts to the best of his abilities and awkwardly laughed out.

*

His quest to evolve into a Lycanthrope had to come to a halt for now, but Sae-Jin didn't become lazy at all.

This time, he worked hard to advance the 'Human' Form, instead.

He was able to somehow squeeze 30 minutes out of the time he could stay in Human Form and during this half hour, he focused on training and exercising. And then, went on Monster hunts as a human. Before long, he was able to grasp the title of the 'youngest ever High Tier Hunter' in the history.

"Are you referring to partnering up with a Knights Order?"

"That's correct. I'm pretty sure there will be plenty of Orders who wish to participate."

Regrettably, training alone had its limits. So, he called for Jo

Hahn-Sung to request a cooperative hunting with a willing Knights Order.

"...Yes. Probably, it'll end up with the Order we choose. But, wouldn't it be better if the Chairman contacts the Dawn directly...?"

Right away, Sae-Jin's sharp eyes landed on Hahn-Sung. Even though the number of people working under him was the highest among all the departments at 13, from some time ago, it felt like he was trying to shuck his responsibilities, somehow...

"No, no it's not like that. I will send the relevant documents right away!!"

Jo Hahn-Sung quickly saw through the meaning of his gaze and bent his back in 90 degree angle.

"Thank you. Well.... oh, right. Mister Hahn-Sung, Are you aware that the space for our HQ is continuously expanding?"

"Yes, of course."

"I am planning to construct more buildings on the area adjacent to this one. The goal is to let each department occupy at least one whole building by themselves. The plan is to also build break rooms and night duty rooms where one can rest, so please spread the word to other employees as well."

Then, Hahn-Sung's eyes gleamed hopefully.

"If, if that's the case, then, the Satan, no I mean, Muffin will be...?"

"Obviously, the marketing department will continue to look after her. Since she's a fussy girl, it wouldn't be too good to change the current caretaker, after all."

"....Ah...."

Jo Hahn-Sung's expression became of someone who had lost his country.

"But, but, I'm not a caretaker..."

....I'm not, and it's definitely more correct to call me a slave instead...

"Pardon?" (Sae-Jin)

Unfortunately, Hahn-Sung could not continue with his words. He simply swallowed back the rising sighs and just shook his head.

*

At the same time, Kim Yu-Rin received a summon from the Raven Order's Master in a long, long while.

Kim Hyun-Seok – not only the Order Master of the Raven, but also selected as 2nd seat in the list of Knights around the world; otherwise known as the Best Highest Tier Knight in the Republic of Korea.

...And also, Kim Yu-Rin's father.

He once said that the relationship between a parent and a child was not much different to that of a boss and a subordinate; when Kim Yu-Rin was first admitted to the Raven Order, in other words, when she was just a high school freshman, he forcefully kicked her out of the house, regardless of how much she cried and begged him not to.

And then, for the past 10 years, Kim Hyun-Seok treated his own flesh and blood poorer than he'd a stranger when it came to official matters. And so, it had been nearly four years since her last visit to the Order Master's office.

"...Pardon? A diplomatic war?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Correct. Now that the Athany doll's effects have been proven without a shred of doubt, and also it's possible for the international Knights Orders to buy one, the number of them lobbying the government has increased by far too much."

The reason Kim Hyun-Seok had summoned his daughter was, of

course, to discuss the matters of the Order.

Currently, the top Knights Orders around the world were engaging in a weaponless war – all for the Athany doll 2.0.

Seen as better than an A-level Mana Spring due to the effects 'Mana recovery' and 'stamina recovery' added simultaneously onto the doll, it now became a core issue directly related to the status of Knights Orders in general.

On top of this, this situation now was different to when the competition only occurred between the local Orders. If another country took it away, then that would damage the prestige of the nation itself.

"And.... and so?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"I heard that you're on friendly terms with the Society's Chairman."

Kim Yu-Rin's body trembled slightly.

"...That... that was..."

"Was it a lie?"

"N, no, it was not! I am friendly with him. We even spoke on the phone yesterday..."

Yu-Rin roughly shook her head. This was the first time her father had summoned her officially and placed complete trust in her. That meant that there was no more suitable person than her for this job, and it also showed how much her father believed in her.

She didn't want to betray his belief in her.

"Is that right? Then I shall leave this matter to you."

"...Please be rest assured, fa... Master."

The word father circled around once in her mouth before dissipating altogether.

For a while now, calling Kim Hyun-Seok 'Master' instead of

'father' had become the norm for her.

< 18. The Vicious Circle (3) > Fin.

Chapter 64: The Dead Ball (1)

From the blood-soaked altar, an eerie aura spread out and descended like a darkest, blackest fog, casting a heavy veil on the surroundings.

A certain ritual-type ceremony was occurring in this accursed place.

The purpose of this ceremony was to take the deepest wishes of the gathered few and to turn that into mental energy which then would cause a physical phenomenon.

"Is everything ready?"

A bewitching voice could be heard from the throne located one level higher than the altar located in the middle. The language used was of unknown origin – not English, not Chinese, nor was it Korean.

But her voice was a clear proof of its owner being the next ruler of all Vampires, judging by the way all nine Vampires stopped their preparations and deeply bowed their heads.

"There is no need. Instead, please inform me of the progress made so far."

The benevolent voice spread out like a cold wind. One of the nine Vampires present, with his eyes red and a robe covering his entire body, carefully opened his mouth.

"We're almost done with the preparations. We've found the coordinates of our home world following the wisdom of our Lord, and all that's left to do is to open the portal with the sacrifices and the accumulated Mana Stones, my Queen."

"..Huhut. Haven't I told you not to refer to me as a Queen yet? You must stop that immediately."

Unlike her words, she sounded pretty chuffed, however.

"So, then - where will this portal be opened?"

"There are total of three possible locations. The country we're currently located in, England; the country where 'Dretoon' has chosen as their base, China; and Korea, where the old man and the kid are currently residing in. However...."

Vampire with the robe showed signs of hesitation and stopped his words there.

"It's quite alright. Speak."

"That is... the one with the highest possibility of being the right portal is the one in Korea. It's probably because there are two Dead Fissures located in the vicinity of such a tiny landmass and so, the probability of our portal connecting there is very high..."

The Vampire suddenly stopped talking here. It was because the wavering aura oozing from the 'Queen' sitting atop the throne was becoming quite serious.

"My apologies."

The Vampire who spoke just now quickly began prostrating on the floor. But the 'Queen' simply sighed out once, and instead of reprimanding him, she encouraged him to continue.

"No, it is quite alright. This is actually for the better. I would have settled our quarrel with the kid sooner or later anyway. Then, let us simply head over to Korea. I trust that you have made the prior preparations already."

"...Pardon? Ah, yes. O, of course."

"Then it's all good. We shall believe in you and leave the rest to your capable hands."

Only then, the powerful pressure bearing down on the entire altar scattered away like the blowing dust. She was gone. The 9 Vampires present could only breathe out and try to calm their minds.

"It is good that she wasn't as furious as we feared."

"That is that, but... besides that, what are we going to do? We haven't even made a single preparation whatsoever..."

A different Vampire asked in frustration.

"...Keum. Just book out a room in a five star hotel, I'm sure she will enjoy that. Our Queen isn't too knowledgeable of the outside world anyway."

"Huh? But what about the other hotel guests, then?"

"Just say they are her attendants or something. There's a chance she might be happier this way with the increase in the number of servants since she'd never set foot outside the Ancient Frederik Castle, not even once."

At this nonsensical suggestion, the other eight Vampires looked at this guy with disbelieving eyes.

"Truly, there will not be any problems. After all, does she not hate being in the same space as the poorer bloodlines? There's simply no way she'll run into other hotel guests."

"...But,"

"Enough. Let us stop this discussion here and begin the most important part of our operation."

A certain afternoon of a Summer day with bright sunlight casting down.

"Heup!!"

Even today, Kim Sae-Jin was diligently hunting in the low Mid Tier hunting ground alone. This was a repeated labour he performed every weekday. Being alone posed no significant problems. With all the Magic Tattoos inscribed on him, as well as the items stored inside with Spiritualisation, he had grown strong enough to defeat a gang of low Mid Tier Monsters by himself.

"Ptooey!!"

Sae-Jin spat out the blood of a Monster that had entered his mouth.

His current appearance after massacring seven Monsters was quite a sight to behold.

On his face, streaks of blood he didn't yet wipe away had solidified, and his armour had become unrecognizable, after being completely repainted with blood, top to bottom.

All this was due to the combat style he naturally developed, one that was born out of the Orc's rough and unsophisticated instincts. He was massacring Monsters worse than Monsters themselves could, with cruelty and no mercy shown.

"Ptooey, tooey!!"

While still looking like a blood-thirsty demon when seen from other's perspective, Sae-Jin started moving his feet.

But after he took only a few steps forward...

Suddenly, a strange vibration could be felt by his senses. Since it was something he couldn't really fathom, he changed his Form into the Ebony Wolf which possessed far sharper senses.

'This is...'

And that's how he was able to pick up the metallic smell so faint, it was close to being undetectable, coming from a great distance away.

And it was a somewhat familiar smell to boot.

'Vampires.'

Judging by the variety of smells, looked like there were more than one. The chances of their number being over ten were pretty high.

"...What's going on?"

He became greatly curious as to why Vampires were moving in a group, when they were well known to prefer moving around solo – as well as to what that vibration he felt just now could be.

Unfortunately, the distance was just too great. The likely location of where their smell was coming from was over 10 kilometres away, judging from how faint it was even with his olfactory sense deployed to the absolute maximum.

"...Way too far."

Changing back to the Human Form, Sae-Jin's brows narrowed. He thought about returning home and ignore this, but he still felt quite uneasy. The mere fact of those Vampires moving around in a group meant that they were busy doing something definitely dubious over there.

'Well, since I can't be sure, I should call someo... Hmm?'

After deliberating for a while, Sae-Jin pulled his phone out from the pocket and then...

All of a sudden, the smell of Vampires disappeared.

At the same time, a powerful shock wave coming to life from out of nowhere thundered across the horizon.

KWAAAAHAAAHANG!!!!!!

A stupendously loud noise that ripped the skies asunder; the vibration that shook the earth; no, this wasn't some measly vibration at all.

The earth's crust itself was undergoing a transformation.

"...Oh, f*ck."

When the flat piece of ground he was standing on began rising up sharply, Sae-Jin rapidly assumed a Monster Form.

*

Normally, a Monster field referred to areas that fell under the

influences of a Dead Fissure. A Dead Fissure referred to a Fissure that was 'dead', meaning it did not expand any further but still continue to produce Monsters from within.

However, at 2 o'clock in the afternoon...

A Dead Fissure 'suddenly generated' on the boundaries between the Monster field of Gangwon Province and the adjoining North Gyeongsang Province. (TL: "경상북도")

And the result was... the earth's crust was twisted apart by the distortion caused by the Dead Fissure's appearance, and a portion of the North Gyeongsang Province had become a new, uncategorized Monster field.

As this was quite possibly the worst catastrophe to befall this country ever since its inception, the government immediately declared a state of national emergency.

[Currently, the areas where Monsters of the Dead Fissure is rampaging in are the counties of Moongyeong, Wuljin, Bonghwa, Youngju, and Yehchun; in other words, one third of the North Gyeongsang's total surface area. All citizens of the North Gyeongsang are advised to evacuate to the South...]

Unfortunately, even though all the Knights residing in the neighbouring Gangwon Province sprang to action almost immediately, the casualties numbered in the thousands, and the damage to property was thought to be truly astronomical.

And what made the matters even worse was that the scale of the destruction was still increasing even now.

"Uhm, Director-nim..."

That was why a cold tempest wind that contradicted the hot Summer weather was blowing within the halls of the Special Investigation Division, the folks entrusted with preventing such disasters from occurring in the first place. "That is... Mister President has summoned you to the Blue House..."

Yu Baek-Song sighed out grandly after hearing her subordinate. She was busy alternating her attention between the various reports coming in from the affected areas and the live news broadcast on the television.

"Fuu...."

On top of the desk belonging to Yu Baek-Song, who was busy massaging her temples while her forehead was deeply creased, was a single notebook. It was the only method of communication with the Mercenary Lycan. But there hadn't been a single reply from him appearing on this mysterious notebook for quite a while now.

"Hmph. It seems that chaos is breaking out even in the President's office. Then, I'll be on my way."

Yu Baek-Song deliberately tried to speak in a relaxed manner, but it was incredibly difficult for Soo-ins to hide their true emotions. Her pure white tiger ears atop her head that usually stood up straight, were drooping down low, demonstrating how upset she really was.

"Make sure to take care of things during my absence."

The subordinates present all looked on at the sight of Yu Baek-Song's petite figure trudging towards her execution ground with pitying eyes.

And precisely one hour 30 minutes later, she returned even more downcast compared to at the time of leaving. Not only her ears, even her tail had lost all energy.

Still, she declared out in a deliberately energetic expression.

"Call for a press conference. We're making a public apology to Lycan."

And an unrest quickly developed within the office.

The 'evidence' given out by the Lycan while claiming to know everything already, did indeed sound like a proper lead to follow. They even had found a Summoning Stone by accident, after all.

But the issue with the Lycan was just how trustworthy he could possibly be. With only a piece of Mercenary application paper dating back from 20 years ago, and every other scrap of information lost during the decline of the Mercenary profession, there was just not enough info to determine whether his achievements and abilities were real or not.

"But, there will be a lot of problems..."

"The President gave his go-ahead already. I'm sure we'll be criticised by one or two Minority Races Rights groups, but by applying the laws regulating Mercenaries, there should be no problems, legally speaking. And also... since we know that this isn't a natural phenomena, we need to grab hold onto any straws we can find."

Yu Baek-Song's decision was unchangeable.

Since it was impossible for a White Tiger, famed for its inflexible ego, to apologise just because of some external pressure, it could only mean that even herself had made up her mind well beforehand.

And such a determination would not be changed easily, so her subordinates didn't speak any further and simply did as they were told.

At the same time Yu Baek-Song had made up her mind.

Kim Sae-Jin was lost.

The sudden twisting of the land caused the previously-nice-towalk trails to become a difficult mountainous terrain, and the banks of stream had now changed into a steep cliff... And to compound his misery, he had to assume the Orc Great Warrior Form which he had been avoiding using until now, all thanks to encountering three upper Mid Tier Monsters. It seemed that there was a problem with the machines separating Monsters by their Tiers.

'...Imma go crazy here.'

That was not the end, though. On top of all this misfortune, unexpected leeches had appeared.

"Right now, the Raven Knights Orders has been deployed near here."

The leeches were the group of survivors busy following behind him like a row of baby ducks.

About an hour ago. After defeating a upper Mid Tier Monster called 'Bladed Ghost' with some difficulty, a group of three survivors had approached him before he knew it and stared at him with doe-like eyes, full of hope.

They probably wanted to rely on the 'beautiful' fame of the Demon, no, the Hero Orc that everyone had heard of.

'Should I have left them then?'

Back then, he thought they might die if left alone, and since they didn't say anything before following him so he let them be, but now...

"Whew-oo. What a relief..."

"It's all thanks to that Orc, isn't it."

"Indeed. But compared to what I've seen on TV, his beard and his hair has become much longer now. It's all shiny and stuff. It's really awesome-looking."

And as he walked westward after thinking there might be an exit there, he continued to 'pick up' more survivors and before long, three had ballooned to 13. 9 of them were Hunters, while the rest four were Knights.

He entertained the idea of leaving it all to the Knights but from what he could overhear, they were at most low Mid Tiers. They wouldn't be much of a help in this place where only the Monsters classified Mid to upper Mid Tier continued to pop out.

"Hmm... Will it be alright to take a photo of his back? He's pretty sexy for a Monster, you know."

"...Huh. What the heck are you even saying right now when our lives are still hanging in the balance? Please don't do anything that might agitate the Orc."

While hearing that conversation, Sae-Jin sighed out inwardly.

It was then, suddenly his intuition rang the alarm bell.

Fortunately, there was only one movement. No, it was just one person moving.

"Something's coming!! Get your weapons ready!!"

A Knight who also sensed the movement shouted out loudly.

SFX for sound of light footsteps

Following the sounds of light footsteps...

"...Oh!!"

....A lone female Knight revealed herself from behind the thicket. It was Kim Yu-Rin.

And when Kim Sae-Jin saw her, with her body covered in vegetation and Monster blood, his heart nearly jumped out of his mouth.

< 19. The Dead Ball (1) > Fin.

Chapter 65: The Dead Ball (2)

– Among those missing from this disaster is the Chairman of the Society, The Monster, Kim Sae-Jin...

Although the number of victims numbered in the thousands, there was one particular missing person that caused much hullabaloo around the world.

And that missing person was Kim Sae-Jin, the leader of the Society rated C+. As he was being seen as the guy to lead the Monster-related industry in the future, his disappearance caused quite a bit of shock.

"Fuuh... Just what the hell is this..."

Thanks to the news of him going missing, a proverbial storm had ravaged through the mansion of Yu Sae-Jung's family and the people working for them.

Of course, it was all Yu Sae-Jung's handiwork.

Currently, the Monster field had turned into a hellhole where Monsters of all different Tiers ended up chaotically mixed together with no clear separation whatsoever.

Thus, Knights Orders only selected Knights ranked Mid Tier or higher to enter the field. Knights with lower Tiers were ordered to remain at stand-by behind the defensive line set up around the perimeters.

At first, Yu Sae-Jung followed the order without much complaints.

But that was only until she heard the news of Kim Sae-Jin going missing.

It was a pure coincidence how she got to hear this piece of news and after becoming really nervous, she tried to call him on the phone multiple times. When her attempts all failed, she then tried to jump over the defensive line and enter the Monster field.

Obviously, she was stopped by other Knights and the soldiers stationed there, and after causing a scene while shouting at them to let her go, Yu Sae-Jung was dragged back to her home about one hour ago.

However, she didn't give up. Instead, she clung onto her grandfather and sobbed and begged him.

Her grandpa, Yu Dae-Ho, was taken back at her actions which he had never witnessed before until now. But he also knew well enough not to send his granddaughter to a definite killing field. So, he promised her that he'd mobilise all of the considerable resources of the Dawn to find Kim Sae-Jin's whereabouts.

Even then, Yu Sae-Jung searched for a chance to escape her confinement from the Yu household mansion, and in the end, the resident Wizard was called in to imprison her in her own room.

But still, she continued to throw a fit in a manner Yu Dae-Ho could never truly understand, such as breaking the windows and pounding on the door endlessly.

"What is Sae-Jung doing now?" (Yu Dae-Ho)

"She has fallen asleep at the moment, sir."

The butler of the Dawn household, Park Hyun-Oh replied with mixed feelings.

"Did you give her that potion with relaxation or whatnot effects?"

"...Yes, sir."

"Besides that, just what kind of relationship does my granddaughter have with that b*****d Kim Sae-Jin that makes her behave like this?"

It was in poor taste as the guy in question had been swept away in this crisis and it was still unknown whether he was alive or not, but as the grandfather of Yu Sae-Jung, Yu Dae-Ho just had to express his anger and hostility at the man.

At the Chaebol's words, Park Hyun-Oh scratched the back of his neck and shook his head.

"Their relationship isn't what you think it is, sir. Rather... it's our Miss who has developed a one-sided crush on him."

"...What did you say?!"

For Yu Dae-Ho, that was even more unacceptable. Just who the hell was having a one-sided crush on who?! From his perspective, it wouldn't even be enough for countless men to throw themselves in front of Yu Sae-Jung's way, but this was...

"How the f*ck do you know about this???"

When a momentary bout of anger exploded out, Yu Dae-Ho had to forego his status as the most powerful elder 'statesman' of this household, at least temporarily.

"Haha... Ah, that is... I checked the messages received and sent on her phone..."

"WHAT DID YOU SAY?? Why the hell are you b*****d looking at the messages of my granddaughter?!"

"....But sir, you have ordered me to 'manage' our Miss until she becomes a full fledged adult."

"....Keheum."

The replies of the butler were calm and concise. Yu Dae-Ho, with his face crimson, tried to calm himself as well and leaned his back against the sofa's backrest.

"...Fine, but what is the progress made so far?"

"Searching of the low Mid Tier hunting ground where Kim Sae-Jin has allegedly gone hunting is 70% complete as we speak. However, we still have not located a person nor remains that could be identified as our target as of yet, sir." "Hmm.... Wait a minute, 70% complete already?"

Yu Dae-Ho tilted his head slightly in confusion.

The current low Mid Tier hunting ground was now a field full of Mid and higher Tier Monsters due to the distortion of the earth's crust. But how come the search had advanced by that much in such a short amount of time?

"This was something even I was not aware of either, sir, but it seems that several international Knights Orders, including the likes of Allene and Veritas, have sent their Knights in to assist with the search."

"...Hu-uh. They are doing something so easy to see through. They didn't even bother to show up during that Africa incident..."

Yu Dae-Ho shook his head in a disapproving expression.

All this, just for the benefits called the Athany doll and/or the Orc's weapons. Their foolish intentions were so easy to see through – hoping to be rewarded for their generous efforts if and when Sae-Jin was found alive.

"Well, I'll go and talk to Sae-Jung's father, so you take full responsibility of stopping that girl." (Yu Dae-Ho)

Yu Sae-Jung's current set of abilities were more than enough to become a Mid Tier Knight, but she was still a low Mid Tier right now. And what's more, during these tumultuous times, it'd be a great luck just to avoid dying a dog's death by going over there.

As a man who deeply loved his granddaughter, he'd do anything to avoid losing her at all costs.

"Yes, sir. Please leave it to me."

"It's Kim Yu-Rin!!"

The survivors cried out loudly while pointing at the Knight revealing herself from behind the thicket. With the situation being such a chaotic mess, people here simply didn't have much mental leeway to remain polite and stuff.

"Is everyone alright?"

Kim Yu-Rin asked the survivors while her chilly blue-coloured, Mana-infused sword pointed at the 'Demon' Orc.

"Yes. Everyone's doing okay, thanks to this Orc..."

"....This Orc? Whatever, just come over to this side, now."

Almost right away, all the survivors ran over to the back of Kim Yu-Rin.

Sae-Jin felt quite bitter at that. This was why the old saying of 'never take under your wings a dark-haired animal' was invented.... (TL: "검은 머리 짐승" it loosely means humans are ungrateful animals, or something similar to that effect.)

"Uhm, excuse me, Miss Knight? I think it's fine to lower your weapon now. That Orc is..."

"There are other Knights to the rear of my position. Please make your escape from this place with them. Hurry!!"

But, Kim Yu-Rin didn't lower her sword. With an unshakeable attitude, she evacuated the survivors first, all the while continuing to stare down at the Orc often referred to as the Hero.

Throughout all this, her sword tip pointed unflinchingly towards the Orc's head.

"...What should I do now?"

Kim Sae-Jin the Orc's lips were drying up real fast. Even if his strength had gone through the roof as the Great Warrior, taking on a Highest Tier Knight was still impossible.

After all, she was ranked 9th in South Korea, and 33rd in worldwide rankings as a Highest Tier. Even the Orc's instincts were cowering before the huge gap in their power level.

" "

One second. Three seconds. And then, five seconds. Time continued to tick by, but the female Knight remained silent, while the Orc was busy shedding cold sweat drops.

A chilly wind blew across the night sky. Under the bright glare of the moonlight, Kim Yu-Rin brought out Mana sleeping within her body outside.

Mana that was boiling like the dancing flames soon became a thin layer that covered her entire body. It was the Mana barrier, the greatest protective shield only the Knights boasted about using.

She was finally done with her preparations, and as things had come this far, even Sae-Jin had to grab hold of his mace tightly.

SFX for a low grumbling growl

However, just as she was about to launch into Sae-Jin's direction...

From somewhere, a low growl of a Monster resounded everywhere like an unpleasant vibration.

"…?"

At this suspicious noise, the taut tension between Sae-Jin and Kim Yu-Rin eased somewhat.

Yu-Rin quickly surveyed the surroundings for a moment, before her eyes went extra-round at the large head that poked out from the forest behind Sae-Jin's position.

At her strange reaction, he too got surprised and turned his head around to see what was going on.

And a hideous dragon-type Monster was there.

A giant snake-like body covered in jet-black scales; a face that resembled a still-growing dragon.

The legendary creature often seen in the oldest of old folktales,

sometimes even referred to as the 'Little King' in Greek – Basiliskos.

A Basilisk.

It was a Monster that resided in the deepest caverns within the High Tier Monster fields. It was an infamously powerful Monster that, in the case of a fully matured individual, a minimum of six High Tier Knights were needed to hunt.

And the reason for such a terrifying creature to roam around here? Most likely, the location of its residence – the deep caverns – had become all mixed up due to the earth's crust distorting about.

"...Oww, c**p."

And judging by the concerned reactions of Kim Yu-Rin, it was quite clear that this Basilisk was a fully matured one as well.

SFX similar to ji~~~ but instead, done by a Basilisk

The Basilisk raised its head high and surveyed the area around it. Then seemingly having found its next meal, the Monster shot forth its powerful glare towards their directions.

In that moment, Sae-Jin sensed a strange feeling of his feet becoming heavy. It was probably the 'Eyes of Petrification' that the Basilisks obtain upon fully maturing.

This effect also affected Kim Yu-Rin as well; and so, two people – more specifically, one woman and one Monster – ended up rooted to the spot, staring at each other.

And sure enough, Sae-Jin could fully understand the complicated light gleaming in Yu-Rin's eyes.

The subjugation of the Basilisk by partnering up.

Without saying a word, he grinned slightly. He then showed her his answer by gripping his mace tightly.

"...Huu."

No matter how friendly it was to humans, there was something scary about an Orc's smile. But Yu-Rin was not in any position to worry about such a thing right now. If she could not defeat that Basilisk here and now, the survivors and her fellow Knights busy making their escape would fall into great danger.

She withdrew the sword pointing towards Sae-Jin.

And that became the signal.

"SFX for an Orc's roar"

Sae-Jin roared out and instead of his mace, he swung his claws around.

Currently, he was busy deploying the Eyes of the Wolf and the Claws of the Wolf as well. Since he was in the Orc Form, their powers were lessened somewhat but still, it was enough to erase the effects of the Eye of Petrification.

He quickly scattered the darkish brown 'energy' between himself and Kim Yu-Rin, and sent her a signal with his eyes.

And at that moment she nodded her head, Sae-Jin rushed towards the Basilisk as his feet let out thunderous explosions.

His reddened muscles bulged until they might burst under the activation of Skills 'Whirlwind Dash' and 'Warrior of Reversal'; he then powerfully jumped into the sky.

His aim was to hit the head of that lizard with the Fierce Strike.

But of course, the Basilisk wasn't going to let him get an attack in that easily.

The b*****d opened up its mouth very wide and spat out thick green-coloured breath towards the airborne Orc. It was the Basilisk's Breath, capable of melting pretty much anything it touched.

But that green Breath was blocked by a wall of Mana that suddenly popped out of nowhere.

This time, it was Kim Yu-Rin's turn.

Well, she was a Highest Tier Knight who had transcended the limits of the 'High' Tier and reached that certain plateau, after all.

*

The ferocious battle only lasted for ten minutes. The magnificent and showy battle was probably enough to wow the entire world but, it was inevitable that there would be incredible damage caused to the actual arena itself.

The acidic blood of the Basilisk had spread all over the place and as a result, the powerful rotting stench came from everywhere. And within the radius of 500 metres, all vegetation was either uprooted or was cleaved in half.

The battleground was so devastated, it was simply impossible to even imagine that this place was a lush forest only five or so minutes ago.

"...Ahhh..."

And finally – propping her body with her sword acting as a cane, Yu-Rin was doing everything she could to hold onto her consciousness, but in the end, with a short whimper, she collapsed on the ground.

"...But seriously, that was just too d**n amazing."

With some extra stamina provided to him by a spare potion 'Spiritualised' and stored within his body, Sae-Jin was able to remain standing; he recalled the short but fierce battle that took place just now and exclaimed out in deep admiration.

The tirelessly dancing sword aura of Kim Yu-Rin – the adjective 'beautiful' perfectly described the clear Mana-infused sword auras that were simply wondrous to behold.

"Fuu."

He searched his surroundings for a bit.

As a Basilisk had shown up here, there was a good chance that Monsters with lower ranks would have scurried away from this place.

So, it was probably safe to relax somewhat.

"Whew-oo."

Kim Sae-Jin then carefully searched for any signs of people around the vicinity before changing back to his Human Form. He then approached Kim Yu-Rin lying on the ground. And when he slowly lifted her up...

"...Mmm..."

Kim Yu-Rin's muffled voice leaked out from between her lips.

In that moment, Sae-Jin's head blanked out. He thought she had passed out but instead, her body was trying to move...

"....Mmmhm..."

"....Whew."

But fortunately for him, she was just mumbling in her sleep.

After sighing out in relief, he carried her in his arms and quickly moved his feet.

*

"Uh! It's a person!!"

Sae-Jin didn't have to walk too far to meet the searching Knights. These Knights discovered Sae-Jin walking closer from the distance with Kim Yu-Rin in his arms and hurriedly ran towards his position.

"Mi, Mister Kim Sae-Jin!! We were looking for you. We are dispatched from the Goryeo Knights Order..."

"Can you take care of Miss Kim Yu-Rin first?"

As his consciousness was all hazy and stuff, all Sae-Jin could think of at the moment was to head home as soon as possible. < 19. The Dead Ball (2) > Fin.

Chapter 66: The Dead Ball (3)

Kim Sae-Jin returned home after somehow shaking off an avalanche of reporters, several Knights and even an ambulance.

As soon as he came back, he headed straight to his bed. And he finally got to enjoy a deep and restful sleep in a long, long while. It was because the Orc's desire for battle had been fully satisfied by the deadly encounter with the Basilisk.

And so, the sun rose on yet another morning; Sae-Jin felt great as he got up and when he switched on the TV out of habit...

He got to experience the symptoms of his brain suddenly stop functioning for a moment or two.

The reason was the footage of the press conference held by the Chief of the Special Investigation Division of Police.

The so-called Special Investigation Division of the National Police.

The special bureau within the Police Force that specifically dealt with the criminals possessing Traits or the knowledge of Mana Utilisation.

Nominally, the Special Investigation Division formed a part of the overall administration of the government, but due to its nature of dealing with 'special' circumstances, it was treated as a separate entity most of the time.

On top of this, the treatment its employees received was better than some run-of-the-mill Knights Orders, so there had been many cases where talented Knights were scouted away to the Division instead.

But, just as the status within the society and the prestige indicated, pride the Special Investigation Division possessed as an organization was incredibly high. (TL: From now on, I'm shortening it to "SID".)

Some people called them 'egoistic' or 'conceited' but in truth, ever since the Division's inception, it had faced tens of thousands of cases yet the number of times they failed to solve the crime numbered in a single digit, so their pride was indeed fully justified.

"... What the heck is wrong with her?!"

That was why, back then, Sae-Jin wrote the words of 'I'll accept the job after you apologise' half out of mischievous mind – which, now that he thought about it, was him behaving like a brat.

A public apology from the Chief of the SID. Now that was pretty much the same thing as the entire organization bowing their collective heads at him after reining in their pride somehow. And such a thing had never happened, not even once in the history before.

- The Mercenary Lycan had been working hard all by himself to prevent more tragedy from unfolding after predicting the occurrence of these incidents. However, we at SID ended up committing a grave sin by calling his efforts terrible acts of hate crime...

The voice coming out from the quivering lips of Yu Baek-Song was feeble and rather pitiful.

Before he knew it, Sae-Jin had taken a proper seat before raising the volume of the TV.

- The result of SID's investigation is that, these Monster-related incidents are definitely crimes and not accidents, and during the course of our investigation, a Vampire who had requested for protection from the government two years ago has become one of the prime suspects...

While he dazedly stared at the cutely bobbing mouth of Yu Baek-Song, his mobile phone began ringing loudly next.

He couldn't tear his eyes off the TV, but still managed to answer the call.

- "Hello?"
- "Oppa, it's Sae-Jung. Are you unhurt?"

The call was from Yu Sae-Jung. Strangely, her voice was so small, it was lower than even a normal whisper.

"Yeah. I'm fine."

- "Whew. That is good.... I..."

She couldn't finish what she wanted to say. Out of the blue, he could hear the loud, angry shouts of "You little rascal!! Are you calling him..." from the other side of the line and promptly, the call got cut off there.

"...What was that all about?"

And as Sae-Jin was tilting his head in confusion...

– I, Yu Baek-Song, as the Chief of SID, is making this public apology to Lycan the Mercenary, and also wish to earn his cooperation as well.

He could hear the declaration of apology from the aloof White Tiger.

Two days later.

He had never seen chaos quite like this one.

The anxiety regarding the Monster field that had suddenly expanded twice its original size had subsided incredibly quickly and instead, the news regarding the Lycan had the country in total upheaval.

As expected, devastating ripples of making a White Tiger apologise publicly, who seemingly had never apologised to anyone ever, had far-reaching consequences.

So, the public and the media kept their eyes and ears very wide open for the response from the Lycan – whether the legendary

Mercenary would accept the apology from the SID that tried to have him prosecuted as a criminal and start working for them, or just like until now, stay silent over the matter.

'Imma go crazy over here...'

But in reality, the person central to this chaos, Kim Sae-Jin was deeply mired in regret and dilemma while looking at the messages Yu Baek-Song had written on the communication note book.

They said that a stone thrown without care would kill a frog – now that he had thought about what he had done, he did indeed behave too d**n thoughtlessly. He didn't have to think too hard to realise that, for SID, their pride and fame was hanging in the balance over solving this crime.

And he just had to make fun of such people like some d**n airhead...

"...Fuuuuu..."

Sae-Jin grandly sighed out and lied back down on the bed.

Vampires – or, those d**n bloodsuckers.

He wasn't able to "think" about them in-depth lately, but his anger towards them remained true.

The thoughts still swirled in his head – Why did those bastards murder my mom? Was there a particular reason for that or was it simply to fill up their hungry bellies? And also... Just who is responsible?

These days, whenever he thought about these questions, his anger boiled so much that sometimes he even woke up in the middle of his sleep.

Perhaps, Monsters' instincts also affected him there. The Wolf, for some reason, hated Vampire species, and Orcs as Monsters didn't know how to calm their anger without fighting, so...

He believed that, no matter which Monster Form end up

assimilating with him, the fury towards the Vampires would only get stronger and not weaker.

After a long, long deliberation while trying hard to think under the clear mindset and logic of a human being, Sae-Jin came to a decision.

His fault in this matter was just too big to ignore. Plus, the debt Vampires had with him was even bigger. And most importantly, didn't these bastards throw a "dead ball" at the population of the planet Earth first by using these incidents, so would it be okay to let them be, just like that?

After sorting out his thoughts, Sae-Jin wrote down his replies on the notebook.

And around ten minutes after he made his reply.

News media sent out 'breaking news' reports.

======

[Breaking News]

[Lycan Accepts SID's Commission]

(First Edition)

=====

[Comments 4830]

– OMG. He accepted the job?! But these cops made him into a criminal □ □; [Liked 2093] [Disliked 858]

L'Honestly, he is a criminal. He murdered Vampires. [Liked 398] [Disliked 693]

LU crazy nutter. These incidents were caused by the f*cking Vampires, but you call these motherf*ckers humans? They are f*cking worse than f*cking animals, that's what it is. Hey you f*cking bloodsucking c*cksuckers, compensate me for my destroyed house, you c*nts. The f*cking poster above mine sounds

like a Vampire so, someone trace his g*****n IP or something. [Liked 673] [Disliked 203]

- But man - the Lycan was a real Mercenary? My uncle, who acted as a Mercenary for a short while as the whole thing came to a crashing end, says he's never heard of the man. [Liked 1681] [Disliked 1458]

Lur uncle's a bi*ch, that was why, you fool. [Liked 381] [Disliked 158] nads.createAd('crn_middle1_mobile', { "floor": 0.05, "refreshLimit": 10, "refreshTime": 90, "sizes": [[300, 250]], "report": { "enabled": true, "wording": "Report Ad", "position": "fixed-bottom-center" } });

LMost Mercenaries regular citizens heard of are all bottom feeders in reality. The really powerful Mercenaries would never hand over their personal information to anyone, because it might threaten their lives, right? And there were lots of Mercenaries who worked while never registering as one, too, but if records remain, then the credibility is 99%. [Liked 481] [Disliked 38]

Lagrange Lag

- Wow. Does this mean the war between the races are starting again? [Liked 1581] [Disliked 958]

LNo, you crazy? We just need to find the Vampires responsible and kill them all. [Liked 581] [Disliked 358]

LWhat do you mean, kill? We should rehabilitate them ᅑᅑ. It's people like you making this world cruel and dangerous to live in. [Liked 181] [Disliked 458]

LDon't make me laugh. Did you know that 80% of all Vampires sent to prison commit suicide? They kill themselves after resisting drinking animal blood, saying how much they hate that stuff.

Rehabilitation? What a joke. Just kill them all. [Liked 481] [Disliked 358]

Over four thousand comments appeared in less than three minutes on the news articles that popped out ten minutes ago, after the Lycan had accepted the commission. It showed how highly focused the public's attention was towards this crime and the Lycan's decision.

"...Whew-oo."

However, Kim Sae-Jin was letting out a soft sigh as he gazed at the contents of the notebook.

[There isn't much space left in this notebook now. We need a new method of communication.]

Maybe it was because he had added a simple enhancement on a regular notebook, the pages were all filled up. It was quite understandable as how this happened; the SID must have felt rather anxious, judging by the daily messages which easily filled up each page that were sent by them all the while Sae-Jin was busy ignoring their calls...

He fell into a thought.

There were two ways to handle this situation. Give them another note book, or meet them face to face and get this over and done with.

The former option was simpler and safer. The latter option was far more complicated and there was also a lot of risk involved.

But still... Sae-Jin chose the latter.

Of course, he wasn't going to reveal his identity. No, it was simply pushing 'Kim Sae-Jin' the public persona forward as the intermediary.

Also, the Lycan in the Mercenaries' records was a completely different person to Kim Sae-Jin as well. Never to forget, by the

time Lycan began moving stealthily in the shadows ten years ago, he was living a grey-coloured life in an orphanage with no dreams and hopes of the future so, there was just no way he'd be suspected of anything at all.

'It should be better this way.'

If discovered, then there was the danger of getting arrested for the crime of public fraud but he still chose to go ahead with the latter option. Like this, he'd be able to demand them to reopen the case of his mother's murder that happened well over ten years ago.

[There won't be no other methods of communication. If there is something you wish to say to me, call the leader of The Monster, Kim Sae-Jin.]

This was what he wrote down.

And in the underground conference room for the SID where the message was received...

""

Yu Baek-Song's face became momentarily blanked out. It was the same for the other top agents present in the conference room to plot their next course of action.

"...Why did the name of Kim Sae-Jin pop out of this thing? Oi, you. What the hell is this sh*t?"

"Pardon?"

Yu Baek-Song bluntly poked the agent sitting next to her and asked him.

"That, that is... Maybe they are, uh, friends?"

"What did you say Kim Sae-Jin's family relations were?"

"Nothing. They are all dead, sir."

"Then how the f*ck does he know the Lycan?!"

Yu Baek-Song narrowed her brows and glared at the agent.

"...Please excuse me, sir."

The agent received this stare for a short while, and then became the proverbial beam of light as he quickly ran off to somewhere.

"Kim Sae-Jin.... I'm hearing this name way too often nowadays..."

Yu Baek-Song leaned against the backrest of her chair and in an expression pregnant with unknown meaning...

YAWN~~~

She let out a mighty yawn.

A Divine Beast was still considered young at the age of 40, and as such, Yu Baek-Song still needed plenty of sleep.

*

After the incident of the Dead Fissure's sudden appearance had calmed down somewhat.

Kim Yu-Rin found herself in a deep dilemma while playing around with her phone.

"By the way, that Kim Sae-Jin must really be an incredible guy or something, right? He even has a personal connection with the Lycan! Maybe the rumour of him using his Trait to regress back from the future is true after all?"

"...No way. That's just stupid. Oh, right! Hey you, did you submit those papers in yet?"

Currently, Yu-Rin was taking a break in the temporary Rest Stop near the Monster field. Stories concerning one certain man completely filled up this place.

"What papers?"

"Didn't you see the public notice that went up? Saying The Monster is looking for new members."

"Ahh, that? Of course I already submitted my papers. Well, I hear

that in the Dawn Order, almost everyone, including the High Tiers, all submitted their forms. Even the Raven's upper Mid Tiers might do the same, or so I hear."

Yu-Rin stopped listening to the incoming yammerings and began lightly tapping on the table with her fingertips.

She was busy recalling the memories of four nights ago.

That was when she subjugated the Basilisk with the aid of the Hero Orc; Sae-Jin appearing suddenly and approaching her, who had fallen down from exhaustion after the battle; and the Orc that had gone missing almost at the same time...

'The time difference is just too short... hey, wait a sec. Kim Sae-Jin said he could communicate with Monsters, so maybe... Maybe, he also succeeded in taming the Demon Orc?!'

But how... even still, could he possibly tame something so humongous?

"*SFX for a pained groan*"

She began to develop migraine from thinking so hard. She massaged her temples while glancing at the LCD screen of her phone.

[Kim Sae-Jin 082-2349-3048] (TL: this should be a fake number. Guys, don't try to call this number...)

Besides the questions lingering in her mind, shouldn't she still need to express her gratitude for helping her out back then?

She swallowed her saliva and made the call.

SFX for ringtones

Unfortunately, he didn't answer his phone again.

"....Ahhhh~~~"

And there was yet another evidence of a missed call from her. Kim Yu-Rin felt so embarrassed and began roughly tousling her *

At the same time Yu-Rin tried to call him.

'Will it work now...?'

Kim Sae-Jin in the Goblin Form was concentrating on an experiment.

'If I fail again, then I'll be in Mana O-Ring...' (TL: This is a Korean online gaming slang term. Bastardised from the gambling term, "all-in." Mana O-Ring means Mana is completely used up.)

This was the inherent danger of crafting a highly specialised item.

The more specialised the purpose, the higher the complexity its manufacturing process was.

This was his 13th attempt already. Just to make one lousy item, he was about to experience the dreaded Mana O-Ring.

"Fuu..."

First, he used the skill 'Ruler of the Water' now at Level D, on 100 millilitre of his own blood contained within a beaker, then he extracted pure Mana from it.

Then crystals would form from that Mana. However, the Kim Sae-Jin's Mana crystals had no use whatsoever in this form. But if he added these to the process of Magic Tattoos, then it was another story altogether.

Originally, a person's particular Traits and Skills were contained within that person's unique Mana signature. Of course, it was plainly impossible to give his Trait over to something else in its entirety – but with the rising Proficiency Levels of the related Skills, it became possible to imbue a part of his Passives to other materials.

In other words, Kim Sae-Jin was trying to add one of his Passive

Skills to a regular material and in the process, create a special tool.

The Skill he wanted to transplant was the 'Wolf's Sense of Smell'. And the tool created with this Skill was a necklace designed to sniff out the unique smell emitted by the Vampires.

The tool would operate like this: the core of the necklace where the Wolf's Sense of Smell has been added to, would also come equipped with another attribute added to it thanks to the Orc's Smithing Technique. When the tool detected the particular odour, it would start vibrating and emit a crimson light.

It did indeed possess some similarities to regular magic artifacts on sale to the public. But it exceeded them in terms of performance as a powerful Skill was wholly imbued into it – although having said that, the Skill's effects would be somewhat weakened, but still.

For now, even making one proved to be tough challenge for him; and he was making a specialised investigation tool because of the current circumstances and not something with a variety of actual uses, but...

But as long as he could become proficient in the manufacturing process, then he'd be able to craft better items in the future so this was all perfectly fine by his standards.

Plus, his Proficiency points were shooting up through the roof as well.

"...Keheung."

Sae-Jin in his Goblin Form poured absolutely every fibre of his being into performing the Magic Tattoo, and then finished up with the Orc's Smithing Technique. And this was his thirteenth attempt today. If he failed now, then that was it for the day.

"...Heup!!"

He then controlled the characteristics of the moisture in the air, and successfully created an odour that closely mimicked a

Vampire's own musk. It was that metallic smell that nearly caused him lose himself to anger just by sensing it.

When the smell slowly approached the necklace, suddenly, a clear red light began emanating from the item's surface.

"I did it!!"

Changing back to Human Form, Sae-Jin picked up the necklace and let out a relieved sigh. But because he had used up a lot of his Mana until now, he felt dizziness assaulting him.

But there was no time to rest.

Knock Knock Knock

- This is the Chief of the SID.

...Since he had made an appointment with Yu Baek-Song today.

When he confirmed the time remaining for his Human Form, there was still 4 hours left. That was enough.

He quickly headed towards the entrance to open the door, but then, stopped in his treks.

"...Right - my scent."

The scent coming out of him was just enough to make normal humans feel friendly towards him, but the story became more complicated if a Soo-in was involved.

And Yu Baek-Song was the so-called 'pure-blooded' 1st generation Soo-in, one of only eight remaining in the world. Since her sense of smell would be more developed than other Soo-ins, his scent might be just too effective on her.

"...Huh. There shouldn't be a problem, right?"

However, if she couldn't even endure the urges of some random scent, then she shouldn't even be called a Divine Beast in the first place. He let go of his worries and then, opened the door.

< 19. The Dead Ball (3) > Fin

Chapter 67: The Dead Ball (4)

"Welco..."

Kim Sae-Jin opened the door wide.

However, there was no one in front of him. And when he confusedly lowered his gaze, only then did he find Yu Baek-Song looking 'up' at him with a dissatisfied face.

Pure white hair. Sharply shaped eyes. Tightly shut lips where he could easily spy her stubborn personality... Her perfectly defined facial features definitely showed the beauty of the Divine Beast seriously well.

However, for Sae-Jin, what drew in his focus more was not her facial features but the two perfectly cute pair of ears standing straight on top of her head and the stiff tail of a tiger on her back.

'She's.... a lot smaller than I thought?!'

Falling into even more confusion, Sae-Jin looked down on the top of her head. Frankly, the impression he got was that she was quite a tall person from all the televised interviews that only showed her face.

But hell, wasn't this at the level of a middle school student?! At a push, what, 155? 156 centimetres tall?

"Keum, keum."

Yu Baek-Song spat out a couple of fake coughs. Quite unlike the first impression of being scary and mean, he just couldn't help but think she was really a cute little girl, what with her small stature and sharp face all working nicely together.

"...Welcome to my place."

Kim Sae-Jin quickly bowed his head. And Yu Baek-Song wordlessly looked up at his face for a while.

That continued for a bit longer.

And then... she began doing the very thing he was worried about. "Sniff, sniff."

Yu Baek-Song's nose twitched as she began sensing the scent coming off Sae-Jin's body. And as expected, there was a certain addictive quality to his scent; her actions of sniffing him up didn't end there.

Sniff, sniff, sniff, sniff~~

She totally forgot all about the real reason for coming to meet him and was completely immersed in smelling him. The stiff tail had become loose before anyone knew it, and was now gently swaying from side to side. And those cute but straight ears of hers had also became softened and rounded as well, slowly fluttering and all that.

"Are you alright?"

"....Ahh. Excuse me."

When Sae-Jin called out to her, Yu Baek-Song could finally regain her senses from the stupor of his scents.

"I'm Yu Baek-Song, the Chief of the SID."

She handed over a business card with her small and pretty hand. The jet-black card contrasted her pure white skin. Sae-Jin received the card and then offered her his hand for a shake.

"I'm Kim Sae-Jin. If I were to say what my job is, then it's the Chairman of a Society."

"I've heard a lot about you. Is it fine for me to enter?"

"Please."

When he stepped aside, she entered past the front door and into his house.

"Sniff, sniff..."

And as soon as she was inside, she began to sniff the air again.

"...Keum."

Kim Sae-Jin swallowed his saliva in slight anxiety. It had been almost a year since he started living at this place. He had been living here while using various Monster Forms, so there should be quite a lot of accumulated odour of Monsters in here.

"Your house smells really nice."

But fortunately, Yu Baek-Song seemed to focus less on the fleeting smells of Monsters and more on the Scent of the Wolf instead. She then expressed her satisfaction at this great (?) atmosphere.

"Is, is that so? Well... Please follow me."

He carried a bitter smile as he guided Yu Baek-Song to the living room.

No actually, he tried to.

She was moving with some difficulty. She'd take a few steps, then stop and start sniffing the air. Then she'd recover her bearings, start walking again for a few more steps, before stopping again to sniff, sniff...

"...Um, hello?!"

"...Your interior décor is pretty nice."

As she spoke those words, there was a certain light glow on her face visible to naked eyes. If one thought she seemed terse and stubborn in appearance initially, now she looked rather coy, somehow. Seriously, she was indeed a Soo-in whose mood would change according to the environment she was in.

"Ahh... well, thank you. Please, follow me. There is something I'd like to show you."

"Understood."

Only then did Yu Baek-Song follow him in while making the sounds of pitter-patter.

Just past the passageway and into the living room, one could see the Sae-Jin's favourite couch where he just loved to lounge around. And even Yu Baek-Song didn't simply walk past that couch. She too gravitated towards that particular piece of furniture naturally, as if it was done all subconsciously.

"This is it."

Sae-Jin picked up the necklace and spoke confidently. But unexpectedly, there wasn't any reaction. And when he turned around in confusion to see what was going on...

66 25

He witnessed Yu Baek-Song breathlessly shoving her face all the way up into the couch and busy sniffing it.

"...Excuse me? Excuse me!!"

Sae-Jin had to call for her three, four times after that. However, she didn't even pretend to hear him. In the end, Sae-Jin had to pick her up by the scruff of her neck and move her away from his couch, like one would pick up a stray kitten.

"Ahh!! Hey, what gives?!"

Yu Baek-Song threw a temper tantrum and flapped her limbs around, but then, quickly remembered the sorry sight she just showed off, so she let out a fake cough and tried to act composed.

"Keum. What is it? Grabbing someone else's scruff already...

"My apologies. It seemed like you were too infatuated with the scent."

"Infatuated?!... Whatever. So, what was it you wanted to talk about?"

"Ahh, that is..."

He gave the freshly-crafted necklace to Yu Baek-Song. She stared at the necklace resting on her palm in silence, before asking him with her head tilting slightly. "What is this?"

"It's a tool to differentiate Vampires from the populace. With this, even a normal person can easily find out whether there is a Vampire in the vicinity or not. Please, try it on."

"...Hmm."

Yu Baek-Song's facial expression was of extreme distrust, but she still tried to put on the necklace.

"How do I put this thing on??!!"

Unfortunately, as expected of a Divine Beast who had never worn any accessories whatsoever in her life, she didn't succeed.

"This son of a..." (Yu Baek-Song)

As there was no progress made the longer the time was wasted, besides getting Yu Baek-Song's face into a deeper frown and her mood all riled up so, losing his patience first, Sae-Jin stepped in to help.

He walked up towards her and personally put the necklace on her neck.

"Euah~ah..."

However, in the middle of trying to put it on, a strange and steamy breath touched the edge of his collar bones. He got so surprised, he quickly withdrew from there.

"....Kkeung."

Yu Baek-Song avoided his gaze while pretending nothing was wrong, but her two deeply-reddening cheeks told no lies.

"What, what? No, besides that, what the heck is this thing?"

She then deliberately shouted loudly in an aggressive growl. Sae-Jin chuckled slightly and explained the abilities of the necklace.

"But it looks like a regular necklace, though..."

Yu Baek-Song muttered to herself as she fiddled around with the

necklace around her neck.

"You can trust me. While searching the areas around the Gangwon Province with this item equipped, you will be able to track down those Vampires hiding among regular people."

"Even though I don't need this thing to distinguish Vampires?"

Before he knew it, she was already addressing him without any honorifics but somehow, it didn't feel too bad. In reality, although her face looked especially young, the gap in their ages was close to twenty years anyway.

But funnily enough, it felt like he was being spoken to not by a much older adult, but by a very young kid instead.

"Well, I'm sure that a Divine Beast can do that with ease. But, isn't it impossible for the other agents?"

"...Hmph."

With her ears standing up straight, she began thinking for a bit.

The abilities of Vampires to blend in with the crowd was so fantastic, even the 1st generation Soo-ins that enjoyed senses sharper than normal animals had real trouble differentiating them.

And, most of the 1st generations had almost gone 'extinct' now. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say, there were only Yu Baek-Song the Divine Beast and Kim Sae-Jin throughout the entire world who could smell out a Vampire with their noses only.

"Did Lycan make this thing? And he told you to pass it over to me?"

"Eh? Ahh, well... you can think of it as Lycan and I have cooperated on its creation."

"Heum..."

Yu Baek-Song took a suspicious glance at him before nodding her head.

"Maybe it'll help out with investigation. We'll see. But besides that."

She easily undid the necklace. It was simpler to take it off rather putting it on, so there was no trouble this time round.

"Isn't there some kind of info Lycan is supposed to give us?"

"Huh? Oh... Let's talk about that a little later. For now... there is a condition attached to handing over that tool to SID."

"...A condition?"

Her brows narrowed at the sudden change of topics. Her expression was of how unhappy she was, but...

"Of course. It's not for free. Since it was so, so difficult making that tool..."

Sae-Jin subtly got closer to her. It was in order to let her smell his scent better.

"Eu, eumhm?!"

He only got closer by three hand spans. But she was visibly panicking. It even seemed that making eye contact with him was getting difficult for her.

"...You see, the thing is..."

His expression slightly hardened when he thought about his mother. He got closer to her a little bit more.

"W, wait, don't come closer...."

Yu Baek-Song found it hard to keep her thoughts straight as the thick scent invaded her senses. She tried to arouse her strong mental resistance to endure this onslaught, but... But his scent was simply too much for an immature Divine Beast to withstand.

On that day, Sae-Jin was able to get a definite answer from Yu Baek-Song. As expected, trying to win over a Divine Beast by using nothing more than his scent was difficult but the fact that she was

a 1st generation Soo-in came to bite her in the rear – since by having highly developed senses meant that she would also react very sensitively towards his scent.

Kim Sae-Jin crafted five more necklaces per instructions of the SID, and they paid over whooping \$4.5 million US for each one of these artifacts.

Afterwards, things moved swiftly, to the point where the Lycan didn't even have to help out at all. That was how great the abilities of the SID agents were. Within a week, they were able to arrest 39 Vampires, and also uncover the fact that seven of them were indirectly related to this disaster of the Dead Fissure as well.

When that happened, several reporters who wrote articles that supported Vampires, as well as members of the Rights Groups that advocated for the Vampires' Rights had all vanished into thin air.

With these discoveries, it became somewhat clear that Vampires had blended into the human society. The public showed great indignation at this fact, all the while singing the praises of the SID's swift response and Kim Sae-Jin's timely inventions.

And The Monster's Class was readjusted to B-after its contribution towards the investigation was acknowledged publicly.

Additionally, as the land price in Gangwon Province hit rock bottom, buying up the available land concluded faster than expected. This whole buying up land was one part of the future strategy both the planning department and the financial department had suggested.

It was definitely the case of a blessing in disguise.

And that was how a Society, founded less than a year ago, had grown to become one of the biggest in the country that possessed over ten thousand pyoung of land in the Gangwon Province. (TL: 1

pyoung = 3.305 square metres.)

"Development of the Society's lands?"

"Yes. I believe this is the perfect timing."

The planning department Chief Soh Jin-Hui came to see him and submitted a report. With curious eyes, he began pouring through it.

The report was filled with many ideas on how to utilise the nearly ten-thousand-pyoung-wide land. A theme park using Athany as the mascot; a luxurious magic shop that sold artifacts that Sae-Jin would make in the future; and plans of forming an alliance with Hazeline's Yoseon Alchemy House, then converting the area around there into an exclusive district reserved for the Goblin Alchemist and the Orc Blacksmith.

"They are all good ideas, but... wouldn't they cost a lot of money?"

"No, not at all!! If I do this together with Mister Yu Dohng, then I can definitely get us lots of savings!! Plus, several famous international Societies are already doing similar businesses as the one I'm proposing, and have met with great success so far! We can do even better than they did! On top of that, many Knights Orders said they will help us!"

Soh Jin-Hui sounded so enthusiastic. Sae-Jin smiled deeply while gazing at her.

In any case, he was not worried as far as the abilities of the people he had picked were concerned. And simply holding onto money was the same as letting them rot, so investing them this way was probably the right thing to do.

"...I understand. Please, give it your all."

Giving his permission, Kim Sae-Jin signed his decision on the report. Seeing this, Soh Jin-Hui did her absolute best to suppress the overwhelming emotions and bowed her waist deeply at him, then left the office of the Chairman.

As soon as she left, Sae-Jin could hear her energetic shout "Hooray!!" of celebration coming from the hallway.

Kim Sae-Jin's face held a thin smile from that, but soon, his expression hardened once more as he pulled out another document from the desk's drawer.

< 19. The Dead Ball (4) > Fin.

Chapter 68: The Dead Ball (5)

Two weeks ago.

The month of October began with 'The Monster' serving as the hottest topic in town.

In order to recruit new members for his Society, Kim Sae-Jin uploaded a notice on the home webpage and then advertised it on his SNS profile. His reasoning this time was that having only '6' members – while he was three of them in truth – when the member limit for the Class of his Society was 250 (excluding employees) seemed like a bit of wasted opportunity to him.

This was quite a departure from the other Societies with Classes higher than B that recruited new members in total secret; the home webpage then ended up crashing due to all the traffic after the declaration of the public recruitment went online, leading to many news outlets to focus on this matter and report on it.

Apparently, huge chaos erupted in the various community chat rooms dedicated to individual Knights Orders, such as that of the Dawn Order; allegedly, some Knights affiliated with the same Orders even held meetings to determine what they should do.

And the final number that had applied during the week-long recruitment process that included Knights from both local and abroad, Hunters and Wizards, was as many as 3000. If one was to count in people from other professions, then that number swelled up to 4000, making it even more ridiculous.

However, among these applicants, there was one man that made Sae-Jin rather anxious.

Kim Yu-Sohn.

The boss of the Mercenary's Tavern, and the man responsible for transforming Sae-Jin into the legendary Mercenary, Lycan.

'Does he know?'

Kim Yu-Sohn's Trait involved dreams and people. While dreaming, he could see from the perspective of a specific person for a short while.

In other words... there was a good possibility that Kim Yu-Sohn was aware of Sae-Jin being the Lycan already.

"Hmm..."

But then again, he wondered if it was better to bring the source of his anxiety closer to his side instead. More importantly, even though they had never met face to face, his credibility was completely assured. If he was a bat-like person, then he'd have sung the tune the moment SID began poking him.

Plus, Kim Yu-Sohn certainly worked his b**t off for a person he had never met before. He had taken the records of his own past when he was working as an A-ranked but still-nameless Mercenary and modified it into the Lycan's, and thus made it so that, when the SID tried to investigate Lycan's prior activities, instead of suspicion, the confidence in this "legendary" Mercenary would rise instead.

– Mister Chairman. Mister Kim Yu-Sohn has come to see you. Should I admit him in?

Speak of the devil... Kim Sae-Jin breathed in deeply.

"Let him in, please."

He greeted Kim Yu-Sohn while being somewhat nervous.

*

"...That means, you knew from quite a long time ago?"

Kim Sae-Jin's worried premonition proved to be right. Kim Yu-Sohn said that around three months ago, when Sae-Jin was 'rampaging' around as the Demon Orc, he had figured it out. No, rather than figuring it out, it was more like he came to understand, instead.

"Yes. The truth of the Chairman being the Lycan... I came to understood somehow, in one certain moment."

"You meant to say... you saw the others, as well."

"...Yes."

Indeed, Kim Yu-Sohn said he got confused quite a lot. Sometimes, his dream would start as an Orc, sometimes as a Wolf, sometimes even as a human.

Because he suddenly had dreams as Monsters, he had to wonder if his Trait had leveled up or something like that. But he got to truly understand when Sae-Jin in his Orc Form ended up saving countless people.

"Well, I'll be. It's a bit embarrassing, isn't it."

When seen through the Eyes of the Wolf, Kim Yu-Sohn had not one speck of ill will in him. If he had any evil designs to begin with, then he would have started blackmailing him a long time ago already.

"Will it be alright for me to know this truth?" (Kim Yu-Sohn)

Even though his worries had become a reality, strangely enough, he felt as if a burden had lifted off his shoulders. In any case, he didn't think his secret would be maintained forever anyways – and also, he couldn't have kept it inside him forever, either.

"No, no. Of course it's not like that. It is my Achilles heel, after all... Hmm. Looks like I don't have any other choice."

"...Pardon?"

At Sae-Jin's words, Kim Yu-Sohn's body shuddered. The middle-aged man must've thought that what Sae-Jin said was equal to his intentions of disposing him, and so, he began to slowly retreat back.

"Looks like you'll have to stick by my side for a long while, then."

Fortunately for him, though, Sae-Jin simply smiled and reached

out for a handshake.

"...Oh. Hahaha... Y, yes. Thank you kindly."

And on that day. The construction of a new Mercenary's Tavern commenced on the grounds of The Monster, with Kim Yu-Sohn serving as its boss.

The amount of things to do after becoming 'B-' Class Society increased by a lot – such as, registering as a corporation, acquiring related business licenses, and of course, recruitment of new Society members.

Thanks to that, almost the entirety of the time limit for his Human Form had to be spent on taking care of the Society's administrative work, and that naturally led to him having less and less meetings with other people for private matters.

"Does Oppa really need to do that selecting new members thingy?"

And so, it became a daily occurrence for Yu Sae-Jung to come and see him in the Chairman's office after ending her own days of work – only after the punishment period set out by her Grandfather had ended, of course.

It couldn't be helped, as Kim Sae-Jin wouldn't meet her anywhere else other than here.

"Yeah. Besides, there are only about 100 people left, so."

"Hmph... I can also help out, you know?"

"I can finish up in 30 minutes if it's 100 people. And well, you're only a Mid Tier, so let's not."

"Wah, again?! You looking down on me again? Didn't I tell you that a normal Mid Tier and the youngest-ever Mid Tier is completely different?"

Yu Sae-Jung's brows narrowed in a deliberate show of her

displeasure. He simply smiled at her dissatisfaction and finished up with the last of the authorisation work needing his attention. With this, his daily admin duties were done for the day, as the interviews with the applicants would only take place on the following day.

"Umm, Oppa?"

Yu Sae-Jung was carefully studying Kim Sae-Jin for a bit as he got up from his seat. Then, with her fingers fidgeting around, she asked him.

"...You can't make time today again?"

Everyday. She wanted to do something – anything – with Sae-Jin.

However... he checked the remaining time for his Human Form. One hour, 30 minutes. To be with her, it just was not enough.

"No, no. It's not like I wanna go some place specific. Just... we can go to Oppa's place, you know?"

Quickly reading his mood, Yu Sae-Jung carefully added more. Her shy appearance was powerful enough to worsen the repressed desires residing within his heart, but Sae-Jin was somehow able to endure it, and he quickly shook his head.

"You're still too young to say you'd go to a bachelor's place like that. Just train diligently in the basement training facility."

He gently stroked Yu Sae-Jung's head once and headed outside the office.

His destination was the Monster field. Since the earth's crust became distorted, the entry was now heavily restricted for regular civilians as well as for the lower Tiered Knights, but Sae-Jin had things to do there.

"Mm?"

But suddenly, Yu Sae-Jung approached him and grabbed hold of his arm.

He turned around to see why and then, forgot what he wanted to say. She was biting on her lip, and her eyes were wet with tears.

Yu Sae-Jung breathed in deeply, before slowly opening her mouth.

"Where are you going? Can't I come, too?"

"....No. You can't."

Regrettably, Sae-Jin had to be firm.

Of course, as he was not a total idiot, he had already seen through her feelings for him that had developed some time ago.

She always came to see him the moment she got off from her duties. And then after parting ways, she'd send text messages until they went to bed. Without having a deep affection for him, she'd never do those things.

"Why not? You always say I can't, but why not?"

"Because... you're still young."

For someone like Sae-Jin who had never held a deep enough relationship with opposite s*x, this was the only excuse he could come up with.

No.

If he made up his mind, then...

He could've told her everything about this motherf*cking Trait of his. After all, Kim Yu-Sohn was aware of the truth already, anyways.

But then, she was not Kim Yu-Sohn. Because Yu Sae-Jung was someone incredibly precious to him, someone Kim Sae-Jin had connected with after going through so much, and that caused him to be reluctant.

The potential misunderstanding, fear, and terror she might feel after seeing him transform into Monsters played heavily in his mind. And most importantly of all... the reason why she even began to have these feelings for him in the first place, was due to the Skills of Monster Forms. It was not a feeling that had naturally developed.

What would she think, once she found that out?

The instincts of Monsters shouted out within him that none of his worries mattered, but the Human Kim Sae-Jin didn't want to hurt this still young and naïve girl.

"You are..."

Of course, Yu Sae-Jung couldn't accept such a reasoning. If he was to continue pushing around the excuse of her being young, then why did he give her all those subtle hints with skinship??

She clenched both her fists tightly. She wanted scream out at the top of her lungs and ask him, whether he was leading her on with these cheap baits or not – but also, wasn't she too big of a fish for him to jerk around?

But...

"....I got it."

Even though she found herself pitiful and pathetic, she didn't want him to hate her.

"Keuhur-urhur..."

The Manticore let out a strange cry as it collapsed on the ground. Kim Sae-Jin the Ebony Werewolf then shoved his claws deep into the Monster's heart.

[The Mana Stone of the Manticore has been absorbed.]

- All Stats rise.
- A new Passive Skill, 'Vocal Cord Reconstruction', has been acquired.

[Vocal Cord Reconstruction] [Skill Level: F]

- When the Level rises higher, the host will be able to speak even when in the Monster Forms.

"....What the hell is this?"

The very first Monster he ran into upon entering the Monster field was a Monster he had an experience fighting against – the Manticore. Back then, he didn't have the leisure to stay and absorb its Mana Stone, so he found this encounter a rather fortunate development.

And the victory came much easier than he thought this time, thanks to a 'Branded Goods' item stored within his body with Spiritualisation.

'But why the hell is this Skill so rubbish?'

He didn't like one bit about the Skill he got after absorbing the Monster's Mana Stone.

Things were a lot different when it came to Sae-Jin absorbing the Mana Stones of upper Mid Tier Monsters.

It was because he'd earn a new Skill simply by absorbing one Mana Stone. That meant, as long as he successfully hunted a upper Mid Tier Monster, that would serve as the fuel for his exponential growth.

Plus, as the entry to this place was heavily restricted, there were no Knights or Hunters in the vicinity as well.

'But, maybe it's not today?'

However, all of those was side distraction for the main reason. Kim Sae-Jin was roaming around the Monster field every night simply because of the 'premonition' Kim Yu-Sohn had.

He said, 'I've dreamt of a sole Vampire walking within the Monster field. I believe that there might be a big harvest if you catch this individual and make him talk by either intimidation or by coercion.'

"Heummm."

Kim Sae-Jin let out a fake cough for no reason.

"Mm?"

Funnily enough, he really did sound like a human just now.

"Wat de?"

Of course, correct pronunciation was still a bit too much for now. Kim Sae-Jin could now sort of understand how a Manticore could 'sing'. It wasn't the kind of Skill with a variety of uses but well, he began moving his feet while deciding to feel happy about it since having more Skills was always better than not having any.

And shortly thereafter, Sae-Jin found the smell he was wandering around for.

*

A British national of "Hispanic origins", a bottom-feeder Vampire named Dwayne was able to enter South Korea with minimal issues thanks to his identity as a Hunter from a First World country. His role was to investigate the lay of the land within the Monster field after it had gone through the distortion.

Specifically, to investigate the portal that would lead to their home world as well as the Dead Fissure, and then submit the findings to his superiors.

SFX for sounds of shaking grasses

And as Dwayne was walking around doing his job, he heard the sound of grass being disturbed from his back.

He quickly turned his head around to look but he could see no living creature there. Thinking that it might have been the wind, he brought his attention back to his front.

"...Uh."

And then, something else filled his vision up.

It was a lone Wolf.

A gigantic bipedal Wolf.

The Wolf made a suspicious grin and slowly opened up its jaws in a terrifying manner.

"Eet's ben a wile."

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A heavy, low-frequency voice. Even though the Wolf only spoke a single line, Dwayne passed out where he stood with bubbles forming in his mouth.

"...Wat de?"

It sure was a strange reaction, but Sae-Jin could figure out the cause right afterwards.

There were 2~3 Skills related to his voice alone. And when those Skills blended in with the Wolf's own voice, the fear effect doubled in its potency.

'Whatever. Less work for me.'

Sae-Jin confirmed the Dark Energy rising from the unconscious Vampire, and then formed the Dark Energy Link with him.

*

Kim Sae-Jin left a mental order of 'cooperate fully with the questioning' on his imprisoned Vampire, and then tied him up in a place far from all human activity with a note that said, "This guy will spill everything out if you torture him".

After arriving back home, he phoned Yu Baek-Song.

Since they had met a few more times in private already because of his mother's case, Sae-Jin thought they had gotten a bit closer. That's what he thought.

"Miss Baek-Song."

- "...I'm gonna hang up."
- "Huh? Why?"
- "Didn't I repeatedly tell you to address me by my full name or I won't even speak to you, eh?"

Unfortunately, Yu Baek-Song was still a feisty little Divine Beast and without the influence of his scent working on her, she maintained a cold attitude towards him.

- "Miss Yu Baek-Song."
- "Okay, what?"

"Please send someone to the address I'm about to give you. Lycan said he has left a Vampire in there."

- "...A Vampire?"

Sae-Jin told her the address where the Vampire was.

- "By the way, what about the matter I asked you about?"
- "Oh, that. All the related info is ready."
- "Then let us meet tomorrow."
- "You wanna meet?!"

Yu Baek-Song showed signs of hesitation. Obviously, because of his scent.

- "Yes. We can't entrust the delivery of such important data to a courier service or to an agent, after all."
 - "....Fine. I'll call you tomorrow."

While maintaining that indifferent tone of hers, she hung up.

< 19. The Dead Ball (5) > Fin.

Chapter 69: A New Starting Point (1)

The following day, the time was noon with the blazing sun overhead.

Kim Sae-Jin had no choice but to walk straight into the proverbial den of the tiger, located in the middle of Seoul. Yu Baek-Song had chosen her own house as the meeting place this time, in order to minimise the effects of his scent that had permeated into everything he had touched.

And so, right now, he was checking the contents of several documents while placed a fair distance away from Yu Baek-Song inside her house. His expressions were solemn and grave, but in total contrast, Yu Baek-Song was busy sniffing the scent that still somehow managed to cross the room with her tail slowly swaying from side to side.

"...Huh."

As Sae-Jin was studying the documents, a hollow chuckle broke out before he knew it.

Within these papers provided by Yu Baek-Song, several truths he had absolutely no idea of were recorded.

One of them was the fact that his mother... was a Mercenary and the father he didn't even know he had, was a Knight. His mom retired from the life of Mercenary the moment she became pregnant with Sae-Jin, and his father took the job that was meant for his mom, and ended up getting killed by a Vampire.

And most of all, the fact that all this information was 'cleansed' out of the Korea's government archives, now that was something he just could not understand why.

"I wasn't the Division Chief back then, but anyways, I can see a lot of suspicious things in there. First of all, there's a trace of the SID performing investigation into the matter... but someone completely removed the existence of all the records."

Yu Baek-Song studied Sae-Jin's reactions and then continued to speak.

"Additionally, your mom was the subject of special surveillance by the National Police for a period of 8 years, meaning from your birth until her death. Such a thing only applies to either an important eyewitness or a prime suspect of a case, but I don't know why your mom was being watched at all. As I've said before, all records had been erased clean."

Sae-Jin raised his head. There were small pools of moisture around the corners of his bloodshot eyes.

"In other words, you are saying, right now you don't know the full details?"

"...Yep. For now, this is the limit of what can be found. More time needs to pass before something can be done."

"More time?"

Yu Baek-Song narrowed her brows slightly.

"I'm currently the Chief of the SID but that doesn't mean I'm the top cat there. We are still the part of the government, you know. The former Chief is still a part of the Administration too, so who knows just what kind of trouble might end up stirring once I start digging into an old cold case? I don't wanna face such unknown dangers."

However, Sae-Jin did not withdraw his fixed gaze. Yu Baek-Song let out a grand sigh in the end.

"...Also, there just isn't enough number of agents available right now. You are aware that all of SID's resources are focused on these Vampire incidents, right? You just have to sit tight for maybe three years, until this chaos is resolved."

[&]quot;...Fuu."

Maybe, what Yu Baek-Song said was correct. To dig into a case that was nominally closed over ten years ago, and furthermore, a case that for some unsavoury reason, was erased from the history – even if it was someone like Yu Baek-Song, the burden of danger would be great.

Unfortunately, Kim Sae-Jin as he was now couldn't be considerate towards such a thing. Even if he had to resort to cowardly and unfair tactics, he needed to uncover the truth as quickly as possible.

"...Miss Yu Baek-Song."

Sae-Jin increased the power of the Skill, 'the Scent of the Wolf', to the maximum. He even deliberately spoke in a baritone voice as well. He then conquered the two of her most vulnerable senses, the hearing and the smell.

"I, I told you, I'm not gonna..."

He took large steps towards Yu Baek-Song. Then, he reached out to grab the shoulders of the retreating woman. Her petite body shuddered.

"Six months. I don't think I can wait more than that. How about it?"

Kim Sae-Jin leaned over and whispered into her ear. Her tiger ears imperceptibly quivered – a sign that his voice was working its magic. He then gently stroked the flapping ears while continuing with his next words.

"I'm not saying you should do it for free. I will give you one item you desire from our Society. With that, it should be enough to satisfy those upstairs people who might get irritated."

He added this new condition. The doll of Athany version 2.0 was an item the government begged him incessantly for. With that, they should forgive him for at least a handful of misdeeds.

"T, that... I, I don't, know, I... no..."

Yu Baek-Song's voice was shaking so pitifully now. This indescribable feeling that was burning up her body was something she had never experienced before in her life.

"Please... let go..."

She needed to resist... One punch would be enough to knock this b*****d out... but strangely, her body wasn't moving as she wanted it to. That warmth transmitting from her ears sent her consciousness into a blur, and plunged her body into a state of trance.

"Heu...."

In the end, she breathed out roughly and leaned into his arms as if to embrace him.

"There is no need to worry. This is a wonderful proposal, after all."

While carrying a cold smile, he whispered into her ear.

That became the critical final blow.

Two days ago.

Agents of the SID were mobilised towards a certain hill with little to no human activity, and as Lycan had said, they found a Vampire tied to a tree and terrified out of his mind.

The agents dragged the guy back to the SID headquarters and then, began interrogating him for the past two days.

But it was the craziest thing. The Vampire caught by the Lycan was different to others of his kin and sang like a canary. As he was a bottom-feeder, he didn't know all the important details, but still, the general information provided by the Vampire that was directly involved in this matter was like a sweet, sweet rain on the dry desert that was the current SID.

Initially, the SID thought about using this information to

continue investigating in secret, but they chose to apply pressure to those Vampires hiding among the general populace and so, they delivered all the necessary details to the media outlets. And they stumbled over each other to break the news first.

And so, the information revealed this way caused a huge shock throughout the country and the world. From the Western European nations that maintained the position of amiable relationship with Vampires, such as France, Germany and England, strange atmosphere began to leak out; and from the other extreme end of perspective, there were signs of racial cleansing operation about to resume in China.

"As it has been reported in the various media outlets, from the combined investigative work performed by the Lycan and the SID, it has now come to light that the Vampires' final goal is to rip open a Fissure to its biggest yet and in the process create a portal that should lead them back to their home world."

Even though the SID had revealed all the information already, countless reporters still showed up for the press conference; Yu Baek-Song was standing in front of them and loudly announced the findings. Innumerable camera flashes threatened to blind her, but her eyelids didn't even flinch.

"Additionally, the number of Vampires hiding in the society is far higher than estimated. And they are divided into factions that serve different leaders."

This was everything Dwayne the Vampire had confessed to.

"I shall now answer your questions."

When Yu Baek-Song began accepting questions, reporters threw up their hands in fierce competition as if they were waiting for this moment. She pointed at the reporter sitting in the front.

"What relationship does Lycan have with Kim Sae-Jin of The Monster?"

"...I don't know. Ask me questions related to this case, please."

Why the heck is the name of Kim Sae-Jin uttered in this place??

Thinking so, Yu Baek-Song frowned a little and then pointed at another reporter.

"Currently, a new rumour of both the Lycan and you, Miss Yu Baek-Song, joining the Society, The Monster is..."

What the hell is this sh*t, now?!

Yu Baek-Song didn't let the guy finish his question before cutting him off.

"There will never be such a thing. If that's all, then this conference is over."

As it seemed like there were no useful reporters here today, Yu Baek-Song chose to end the Q&A session sooner than expected and turned on her heels to leave. The reporters then belatedly began throwing the right questions at her way but she remained coldly indifferent.

And so, the press conference ended sooner than expected, but still, the truth of the Lycan's effort resulting in the breakthrough of this case had now been revealed.

Then, a strange new trend started up all over the world when it became known the Lycan's continued efforts had played a crucial role in uncovering Vampires' goals.

And that was people wanting to become Mercenaries.

In other words, the profession of Mercenaries that had gone past the level of being in decline, and into complete dissolution was showing the signs of rejuvenation.

- "We've received a lot of commissions. Jobs such as tracking, investigation, eradication, etc. They are quite varied in nature." (Kim Yu-Sohn)

"...Is that so?" (Kim Sae-Jin)

Thanks to this development, Kim Yu-Sohn had suddenly became incomparably busy.

- "We should refuse them all, yes?"

"Yes."

Because of their current circumstances, they had to refuse every one of the commissions, but still, Kim Yu-Sohn's voice was thick with joy.

- "And also, there have been an increase of people coming here, applying to become Mercenaries. There were a few serving Knights among them as well. That is why, Mister Chairman, how about forming your own Private Mercenary Company using this chance?"

"Huh? A Mercenary Company?"

- "That's correct. Under the name of 'The Monster Mercenary Company'. Of course, although the Mercenaries of the old operated on their own, as the times change, so should we. My son has also decided to help me out as well. If the Chairman's thoughts and ours align, then my son and I will..."

"Alright. Please make it happen."

Sae-Jin's reply was swift.

If it's a Mercenary Company affiliated with his Society, then that meant he could wield them like his own private soldiers. Since receiving the information on his parents, Sae-Jin was thinking about doing this, too – after all, he just couldn't sit tight and do nothing while waiting for Yu Baek-Song to come through forever.

- "I beg your pardon? Y, you are serious? Is it okay not to think it over?"

"It's fine. Ask the financial department for the necessary funds. Oh, and by the way, will it be possible to raise intelligence operatives as well?"

- "Ah, ah! Yes, it's definitely possible! After all, I specialised in that field when I was younger!!"

Kim Yu-Sohn hoarsely replied in a near-scream.

"That's good. Then, Mister Kim Yu-Sohn, please take the reins of this matter and give it your best. I'll reposition you as the Commander of the Mercenary Company as well. Ah, right. Before you pick a Mercenary, please bring that person to me at least once. I'd like to see their faces."

- "I, I understand! However, the role of the Commander should be you, Mister Chairman. As for me... it's enough as the Director of the Mercenary Company."

"If that is the case, then I shall leave everything in your capable hands."

After ending the call with the brightly smiling Kim Yu-Sohn, Sae-Jin then immediately phoned both the planning and the financial department.

And on that day, on a certain spot of land belonging to the Society, the foundation for the future headquarters of 'The Monster Mercenary Company' was laid out.

*

"Wah, what is this thing?"

Just like before, as soon as her duties ended, Yu Sae-Jung came over to Kim Sae-Jin's office.

However, today was slightly different.

Kim Sae-Jin was waiting for her to come and as soon as she showed up, he gifted her a 'magic artifact' he had crafted, and Yu Sae-Jung's eyes went extra round at this sudden and unexpected gift in the shape of a necklace.

It was a stunningly beautiful necklace with a ruby serving as its centrepiece – a masterpiece Sae-Jin poured in a lot of effort to

create.

He imbued the effects of the Skill 'Warrior of Reversal' into this ruby necklace. Depending on the amount of Mana poured into the ruby by its wearer, the strength and the duration of the Skill would vary accordingly.

Of course, it was still a pale imitation of the real Skill but, for the Knights whose positions could be decided on even the smallest differences, such an item would truly be a priceless treasure.

"I made it for you. It's an artifact, but it's a bit different from the others."

"Oh, is it similar to those necklaces you gave to the SID?"

She smiled happily and immediately put the necklace on.

"Yeah. But it's also quite different. You heard that an artifact shop is going to open within the grounds of the Society, right?"

"....Uh? Ah... Are you going to sell this necklace over there?"

Her joy was short lived, and she became really disappointed.

"Haha. No way. I've made that especially as your present, you know."

He chuckled and explained further about the necklace. Then her eyes went round again, as she'd never heard of such an artifact before in her life.

"Really? Can I try it out now?"

"Of course."

She immediately poured her Mana into the necklace. Right away, a mysterious vitality began entering her body. This explosive feeling where all the Mana in her body wanted to erupt out – although the process only lasted for 60 seconds, this experience left a huge impression on her.

As if she became an imbecile all of a sudden, she stared at Sae-Jin with her mouth gaping open. Her prior experience of buying and using countless artifacts told her all she needed to know only after using it just once.

An exceedingly beautiful exterior and a special effect added to it, this was... an incredible item that couldn't be properly described in mere words.

"I'm... giving this to you as an apology for the past. But don't be burdened by it, please. It's not purely a simple gift anyway. You're making lots of appearances in television nowadays, right? Please wear it when you are in front of the camera. If you fail to wear it even once, be prepared to hand it back, okay?"

At her frank reaction, Sae-Jin smiled in satisfaction.

In spite of that, she continued to stare at him without moving – until suddenly, a drop of tear formed in her eye.

"What, why are you crying? Did I do something wrong?"

"...No, it's not that... Just..."

I'm just thankful.

Instead of saying these words, Yu Sae-Jung took one big step forward and tightly hugged him.

"...Uhm..."

The Human Form Kim Sae-Jin experienced confusion at this sudden, unexpected and abrupt skinship. And his response to this situation while suffering through the confusion, came out from his instincts.

He gently wrapped his arms around her waist and embraced her even tighter.

And so, their embrace continued on until Sae-Jin somehow could recover his senses.

< 21. A New Starting Point (1) > Fin.

Chapter 70: A New Starting Point (2)

Inside a country house located in the rural Jeolla Province, the location shoot for a certain entertainment programme was taking place. The programme was called 'Knight's Country House', considered as the hottest among the rampantly expanding number of Knights-related shows currently.

The concept of the show was as the title suggested.

Nine Knights would reside in a house located in the Monster-free area of Jeolla while performing 'missions' and 'games' planned out by the producers, as well as cooking their own meals and have honest chat together.

At first, the idea might sound rather plain, but by having 9 people with strong personalities, many entertaining situations were captured on film. For example, as eight out of the 9 participants here were groomed to become Knights from very early ages, only one knew how to cook rice properly, so naturally, chaos ensued whenever it was meal time.

Among these colourful characters, the one with most amount of fans were, of course, Yu Sae-Jung.

Although she maintained an indifferent expression most of the time, the dazzling smile brighter than the sun itself that sometimes leaked out made her such a charming woman on screen. It truly wasn't an exaggeration to say that this programme was instrumental in her official fan club being established.

So, in a way, Yu Sae-Jung had greatly benefited from this show, as well as being its most important contributor.

"It's been too long, Sae-Jung~~ This Unni thought she was going crazy from wanting to see you~~!!" (TL: Unni is the female equivalent of Oppa.) "...Even though we saw each other two weeks ago?"

The filming of the episodes took place every fortnight, for the period of four days and three nights, and so, it somehow did feel like it had been ages since all nine of them could sit down in one room together. They had gathered in the living room while sharing greetings among each other, and then waited for the producer to give them a new challenge.

"Wowsers, Sae-Jung! What is that necklace?"

While they were waiting, a female Knight named Kim Hui-Soo pointed at Sae-Jung's necklace and asked.

"Yea, yes?? What?"

Although she was expecting it but now that the question was finally here, Sae-Jung couldn't help but feel quite nervous. She did have an excuse called "indirect advertisement", but... Well, this necklace was the very first gift that man had given her, after all.

"Hmph. Did a boyfriend buy it for you?"

A male Knight sitting on a couch while putting on a serious air spat out while looking dissatisfied.

He was Sohn Chul-Joon, a High Tier Knight from the Goryeo Knights Order – and supposedly, having a romantic interest in Yu Sae-Jung. Although the said interest was nothing more than Sae-Jung who couldn't cook to save herself, utilising his skills a bit; but since they looked good together on screen, the producers, the writers and the viewing public came up with their own narratives all on their own.

"Wow, is it true? OMG, a really big event broke out before the filming even began?"

"The filming started already, though?"

"....Anyhow, Sae-Jung, did a boyfriend really give you this as a present? No, no, did Sae-Jung have a boyfriend before? Wow, Chul-Joon Oppa is so screwed now~"

Right away, all nine Knights began yapping away, with Yu Sae-Jung's necklace being the focal point. This was the charm of this particular show, where the scenes of chaotic yammering would often fill the airwayes.

"N, no, it's not like that!!"

In the end, Yu Sae-Jung had to shout out and only then, the sounds of their conversations died down.

Yu Sae-Jung's face reddened as if it might burst open from all the attention poured onto her by her co-stars and the film crew, which numbered around 60 people.

If this was her normally, then she would've assumed the same cold indifferent attitude and end this fiasco right there, but since it was related to Kim Sae-Jin, she couldn't maintain a calm facade at all.

"Well, it is a present, that's true..."

"But it's not from a boyfriend, is that what you're saying?"

Sohn Chul-Joon chuckled lightly and for some unknown reason, slicked back his hair.

""

Too bad for him, Yu Sae-Jung didn't reply.

Honestly speaking, she had never been in a romantic relationship before, and maybe because of that lack of experience, she was getting quite conscious of Kim Sae-Jin's presence, which was unlike her.

They did embrace, sure, but since he didn't say it out aloud, it seemed certain that they were not an item. But what if he doesn't like it, if she declared that fact right here?

"...What the, so, it's true?"

Sohn Chul-Joon momentarily lost his composure. Regardless, Yu Sae-Jung didn't open her mouth for a long time, until...

"Not from a boyfriend, but it's a gift and a sponsorship deal at the same time..."

In the end, she denied it.

As soon as Sohn Chul-Joon let out a sigh of relief, this time the female Knights jumped on her like a pack of hungry animals. Even though they were Knights, well, they were also women as well. The ladies began asking about the necklace, such as where did she buy it, how much was it, was that ruby real, etc, etc...

"Well, everyone, please calm yourselves. We're filming for real now."

Only when the producer stepped up did the noisy hullabaloo come to an end.

'But the signs are good...'

There was a huge grin plastered on the producer's face. It was understandable, as a potential gold mine had been unearthed only after the cameras began rolling for less than 30 minutes.

On top of that, the rare sight of Yu Sae-Jung being so shy was wonderful enough to make him want to embrace her himself....

'No, no, no no, that's not it.'

The producer quickly shook his head and then displayed a board with the participants' mission written on it.

"Well, you guys must be feeling peckish by now. Why don't we have something to eat first?"

*

An afternoon with the sun blazing down.

Seven Knights left on the mission, or the collection of ingredients, for their food. Meanwhile, Yu Sae-Jung stayed behind to learn how to cook from Sohn Chul-Joon.

Even though it was called how to cook, with no ingredients to

practise, she was just cooking rice for now. But Sae-Jung was paying 110% attention to what Sohn Chul-Joon was saying.

Before, she only pretended to learn as there were cameras filming her, but from some time ago – no, more correctly, that moment with Kim Sae-Jin, changed her thought process greatly.

Thinking about the appearance of Sae-Jin enjoying her cooking... just imagining that alone made her happy.

"Is this enough?"

Yu Sae-Jung pointed at the pot filled with rice while carrying a needlessly determined expression.

"Yeah. There's just enough water and it looks good."

Seeing her adorable appearance, Sohn Chul-Joon chuckled slightly and reached out to pat her head. However, the speed of Yu Sae-Jung's reaction was incredible, and his hand ended up dancing in the empty air.

"...Keheum. Oh, a mosquito."

Getting embarrassed now, Sohn Chul-Joon waved his hand around twice more as if there really was an insect there or something.

"Let's make the soup next."

*

"I'll buy you something more expensive later on."

During the break between the filming, Sohn Chul-Joon suddenly pointed at Yu Sae-Jung's necklace and laid on a thick smile.

"Excuse me?"

"I meant that thing."

Discussing about buying something expensive to a 3rd generation Chaebol was the strangest thing as she could buy anything she wanted – but for the sake of maintaining a certain public image, in the interviews she always said that she lived frugally while being given an allowance. So, the misunderstanding of Sohn Chul-Joon was, well, understandable.

"You mean, something more expensive than this?"

Yu Sae-Jung looked at him with a slightly disbelieving face. Maybe this situation came about because the artifacts from The Monster hadn't been unveiled to the world yet. Yu Sae-Jung found Chul-Joon's attitude of looking down on the gift necklace rather disagreeable, but he remained ever so confident.

"Obviously. I know that the true value of a gift isn't judged solely by its price, but I can tell there will be much more prettier necklaces for you out there."

With a slightly strange expression, Yu Sae-Jung stared at him for a while, before...

"...You probably need to bring out a pink diamond if you want to top this necklace's value..."

She muttered out softly.

Unfortunately, as he was too deeply appreciating the depth of his own comment, he didn't get to hear what she said.

"Mm? Did you say something?"

"...No, not really."

*

While Yu Sae-Jung was learning how to cook for Kim Sae-Jin, the man himself was training hard in the underground "members-only" training facility below the Society's headquarters.

"Wow, what is this?!"

But Sae-Jin wasn't alone in the facility. That was because the Knight Order that was chosen to partner up with The Monster, the Raven Order, had sent a Knight to aid him in his training.

"Mister Sae-Jin, your physical abilities are pretty good!!"

And the Knight assigned for this task, Yi Hye-Rin, was busy praising him.

Yi Hye-Rin was second only to Kim Yu-Rin in the looks department within the Raven Order, and thanks to her sociable personality, she was far more active than Yu-Rin in the entertainment industry.

And since Sae-Jin's only habit was watching TV, he obviously knew who she was. Besides that, she was also one of the people who received the Orc's weapon as well.

"If you rate me with the Knight's standards, where do you reckon I am?"

"Hmm, maybe... Maybe a low Mid Tier? I think it might be around there."

The reason why the Raven had sent Yi Hye-Rin out of all the Knights in their Order was, of course, the famed honey trap. After all, Kim Sae-Jin was a man, wasn't he?

"Ah. Is that so?"

At her words, Sae-Jin felt incredibly dejected.

He didn't strengthen his body via Spiritualisation. So, this meant that the Human Kim Sae-Jin's Stats had reached the level of a low Mid Tier Knight. That was certainly enough to feel proud about, but...

'It's still too much for me to step forward, yet.'

But it was still not enough for him to fight Vampires in his Human Form.

"What the, why are you so disappointed? Even this is something amazing, you know~~"

Yi Hye-Rin still sufficiently praised the downtrodden Kim Sae-Jin. However, instead of such a courteous encouragement, what he wanted was a proper training regime.

"Shall we move on to next part of the training? Is it weapon mastery next?"

"Ah, yes. Let's do that. Hurry, hurry~~"

After determining his physical limits, it was the turn of weaponsrelated martial arts training. The Orc's special Passive, the 'Weapon Mastery' applied here. The Skill's Level was so high that, now he could theoretically wield any type of weapon better than a high level user.

"What should we use first~ Eeny, meeny, miny, moe~~"

Yi Hye-Rin nimbly trotted towards the display cabinet for the weapons and picked up two longswords, of which she gave one to Sae-Jin.

"First, a sword. It's the most popular weapon, too. Since it's so-straight, it's easy to cover it in Mana's aura, and it is also the easiest for the beginners to learn how to wield as well. But there are so, so many different types of swords out there. So, the swords we are going to use today is called a longsword..."

Yi Hye-Rin really talked a lot while always smiling brightly. At first, Sae-Jin got slightly irritated, thinking whether her personality was really that positive all the time or not, but...

"Like this, swoosh, swish!! How about it, can't even see an afterimage, right~~?"

...The more he watched her, he couldn't help but smile as well. He sort of understood why she was more famous as an entertainer and not as a Knight.

"Ah, by any chance, have you learned how to handle a sword before?"

Yi Hye-Rin asked in a surprised voice when Sae-Jin unsheathed the sword in an expert manner. "No, not at all. Besides some things I got used to while hunting, I haven't received any real training."

"Oh... so that's how it is."

She took the sparring stance while slightly tensing up.

"Well then, should I start the skill test?"

"Please do. By the way, you don't have to take it easy on me."

When he lightly swung the sword in order to loosen up his wrist, the afterimage of the blade wavered and danced about in the air like a snake.

"...Uhm... You really didn't learn any swordsmanship?"

His appearance simply couldn't be called 'normal', so she quickly asked him again.

"No, I haven't. But I might possess some modicum of talent, you see."

At his vague reply, Yi Hye-Rin's expression became a bit worried.

In reality, she became an upper Mid Tier Knight relying on her Trait and abundance of Mana, rather than her skills with a sword – she was one of those Knights commonly referred to as a "Trait Baby".

Because she was the type who enjoyed living her life, Yi Hye-Rin didn't pay too much attention on polishing up her swordsmanship which required her to repeatedly perform the same action over and over again. Of course, her talents with the sword were still excellent enough to be on the level of a Mid Tier Knight, but...

"...We shouldn't use Mana or Traits, right?"

"Of course. I can't utilise Mana, after all."

Kim Sae-Jin pointed his sword at Yi Hye-Rin. The edge of the blade gleamed sharply.

"Ready?"

"...Yes? Ah, Yes. Please, c, come."

Hye-Rin gulped down her saliva and corrected her posture.

Sae-Jin dashed forward without much fanfare.

This would be his first time fighting a Knight as a Human. So, he wasn't too sure how to proceed with the fight. Instead, he chose to leave everything to his instincts.

Arriving at Hye-Rin's position, he lowered his stance in a blink and slashed upwards.

"!!!"

She hurriedly tilted her sword to block the attack, but realised the force behind it was nothing to laugh about. She had blocked just one hit, yet the hands gripping the sword were aching already.

But there was no time to remain stunned. Sae-Jin continuously slashed with his sword. Ferocious and aggressive, his swordsmanship was something that would not be found in any of the textbooks.

Kwang-kwang-

Each time she blocked his blows, sounds similar to when bombs went off, resounded out. Hye-Rin just could not believe that there was no Mana involved in his strikes.

"Eu, euah!! Hey, wait!! I surrender, I suuuurrender!!!"

Their sparring didn't last for long.

She couldn't endure the immense power contained with the diagonal downward slash of Sae-Jin and lost the grip on her sword.

"Ouch."

With a sorry-looking demeanor, Yi Hye-Rin crouched down on the floor and massaged her hands that had a slight trace of blood.

"Huh? I won?"

Sae-Jin dazedly muttered out. And his words ended up poking Yi

Hye-Rin's pride as a Knight.

She gritted her teeth and stood up.

"...It's because this isn't the weapon I use usually. Hey, excuse me, Sae-Jin-ssi, you really didn't receive any training before?"

Already, the honorifics she used had changed from Sae-Jin-nim to Sae-Jin-ssi. (TL: Oh boy. I deliberately avoided TLing this particular honorific scheme of Korean language, but here it is. Basically, a "nim" is comparable to "sama" in Jap novels, while a "ssi" is kinda like "san". So, she's stopped calling him Sae-Jin "sama" and started calling him Sae-Jin "san" which is slightly less respectful.) "No, I really haven't. So, should we stop the training here for today?"

"What do you mean, stop? We still have lots of weapons to go through, you know?"

Yi Hye-Rin smiled forcefully and pointed at the various weapons stored inside the display cabinet. She figured that Sae-Jin only possessed some talent in wielding swords so, while puffing out hot air through her nostrils, she picked up a spear.

"A longsword doesn't really suit my style. Now, I shall demonstrate spear arts."

Hye-Rin confidently declared.

And then, she lost exactly seven times in a row.

But what mattered the most was that the last sparring was done with her main weapon, a thin-bladed two handed sabre.

Unfortunately, she still tasted defeat, and with her pride trampled on, she ran off back to her home in tears.

*

[&]quot;How is the progress?"

^{- &}quot;I'm working hard already, so stop pestering me."

Yu Baek-Song's terse voice could be heard from the phone's receiver.

"No, no. I'm not pestering you. Just that, I'd like to let you know that in case you need any assistance or manpower, do not hesitate and ask me. I'm sure you've heard of this already, but I am currently establishing a Mercenary Compa..."

- "Don't need it. I'm hanging up."

"Ahh, wait a second."

Yu Baek-Song was really cold towards him. It was truly a mysterious thing, the way she acted. After all, she couldn't even resist him when they meet, but over the phone, she was like an untamed cat or some such...

"There is something else as well."

- "So, what is it?"

But seeing that she didn't end the call first, there must've been some lingering aftereffects remaining.

"The Lycan said that, there's a suspicious hotel."

This was the information given to him by Kim Yu-Sohn. But Sae-Jin made it so now that it was coming from the Lycan, all in order to hide that man's Trait.

- "Which hotel?"
- "Not sure. It was just a hotel."
- "Are you making fun of me right now?!"

There was a trace of anger in Yu Baek-Song's voice. Kim Sae-Jin ended up carrying a thin smile, while thinking that she was like an angry cat or something.

"I'm not joking. Are you not taking the Lycan seriously now?"

- "...No, that isn't it. However, he can't just say it's a hotel. Is he trying to say we must investigate every hotel in the country?"

"I know, but still, please try your best. I want to help, but as it's still early days for my Merc Company, I too lack the necessary manpower."

- "No, that's.... Fuu."

Yu Baek-Song spat out a long sigh, and unwillingly replied that she'd do it.

< 21. A New Starting Point (2) > Fin.

Chapter 71: A New Starting Point (3)

He was back, once more, on the Monster field.

And Kim Sae-Jin was pouring in an incredible amount of power to smash down on the head of a Sabre-tooth Tiger with his mace.

Kwaaahang!!

That stupendously powerful strike created a loud noise as it caved in the skull of the Tiger that was supposedly harder than that of a diamond.

SFX for a beastly growl

The Sabre-tooth Tiger continued to threaten Sae-Jin by swinging its claws around with its head caved in, but that was only for a brief moment. The creature began to stumble around like a drunken butterfly before collapsing on the ground.

Sae-Jin walked towards it, pulled the fangs out and pocketed them, before absorbing its heart.

[Active Skill, 'Sabre-tooth Tiger's Energy'] [Skill Proficiency Level: F]

- Instantly recovers spent stamina and Mana. However, the recovered stamina and Mana will dissipate ten minutes later and the caster will return to his original condition.

As the result he got from that final bit was quite satisfactory, Sae-Jin decided to head back home.

But, when he turned around...

The sights of two Orc Jaguars busy sending their sparkling gazes towards him filled up his view.

"Khwoar?!"

Sae-Jin screamed out after getting a fright of his life thanks to that 'grotesque' scene before him.

It was a simple scream, for sure.

However, there was a slight issue with the Monster Form he was currently using.

The Sabre-tooth Tiger was too strong a predator for the Ebony Werewolf Form to take on, so he had no choice but to assume the Orc Great Warrior instead.

Maybe that was to blame for what happened next. His scream became a powerful roar louder than a thunderclap that reverberated the entire mountainside.

"Guwu, guwu!"

The Orc Jaguars in front of him quickly began prostrating. And they continued to repeat that same action of bowing their heads before him.

"...What the..."

... Heck is this situation?

Sae-Jin stared at these two weird Orcs for a long time.

'Ahhh. Maybe?'

Then a lightbulb went off in his head. He came up with a theory that could definitely explain away this strange situation.

Orcs possessed this characteristics of wanting to submit to the stronger Orc than themselves. If viewed from that point, then Sae-Jin was definitely the most powerful Orc in the Monster field that could easily make other Orcs grovel before him.

Additionally, didn't he defeat the Sabre-tooth Tiger that was threatening the lives of these two, just now? Of course, it was the possibility of acquiring a Skill that blinded him, but still. What happened was enough for these Orcs to fall (?) for him pretty hard.

"...I get it now, so go away."

Accepting this explanation, Sae-Jin gestured with his hand to

send the Orcs away, then tried to go on his own way.

However, the two Orc Jaguars continued to follow Sae-Jin around. And whenever he glanced back at them, their sparkling eyes never stopped gazing back.

That carried on for another 20 minutes.

'They do look kinda pitiful.'

Maybe because he was in the Orc Form, he began to feel sorry for these two Orcs – one a dude, the other... probably a girl – following him.

Judging by their armaments, they must have come from a village located around the Mid Tier hunting ground... but, most likely, when the earth was overturned, they ended up losing their home village.

Also, in the current Monster field where the Monsters of all Tiers were mixed up chaotically, the chances of a small group of Orcs surviving for long was really low – enough to say that it was a miracle these two had survived for this long.

"Fuu..."

Kim Sae-Jin let out a low sigh and looked up at the sky above.

The sun had already buried itself deep into the creeping darkness. It couldn't be helped; weren't the hours getting too late for him to look after these two Orcs?

He lowered his gaze towards the following Orcs.

"...Uh-whew."

When he took a closer look, their faces looked rather friendly. Hell, he even thought they kind of looked adorable, too. Not even himself knew why he thought their horrid faces looked adorable, though.

"They could be of some help in the future if I nurture them."

Finally, Sae-Jin made a decision. After all, if he was in a Monster Form and not a human, then the thing he had the most to waste was time, anyway.

"Come with me."

He growled lowly and led the two Orcs away while searching for the location to set up a brand new Orc village.

*

He found a spot with an impressively steep cliff to the rear, which should help with the defenses, and a stream of fresh water not too far.

Sae-Jin chose to build his village in this blessed piece of land.

But before that, there was a need to perform a certain... imprinting work on these Orcs.

"Watch carefully."

Sae-Jin made the two Orcs stand before him and showed them his various Forms. First, the Human, then the Goblin, and finally, the Werewolf. He deliberately left out Athany, though.

"Euhurng??!"

Whenever Sae-Jin changed his Forms, the Orcs' eyes went round in pure shock, but thanks to various Skills he possessed, such as the 'Predator' and his scent, they didn't try to attack, simply choosing to obey him.

And that's how he completed the so-called 'imprinting work'. Next, while using the Orc's Smithing Technique, he began a huge scale construction work. Now that his Proficiency Level was at B-, the job turned into a stunningly simple and efficient affair.

By changing the characteristics of the soil, he made "wooden" fences tougher than reinforced steel rise up in specified locations. Then, on these fences, he added an attribute called 'Damage Reflection'. This way, Monsters trying to attack the fencing would

die from their own attacks – all the while failing to figure they were wounding themselves.

And 7 hours later, the new Orc's village was completed as the morning sun began brightening up the horizon.

'They should be able to repopulate this place by themselves, right?'

Sae-Jin heard that, whenever Orcs got excited, they would mate and produce as many as ten offsprings a month. (TL: WTF?! Really? They are more like a bunch of roaches, then...)

There might be some danger of... incest happening in the future, what with only two Orcs starting a village, but since these creatures didn't really care for such details, there was not much he could do on that count.

"Somehow, everything is finished."

The sweat from this unexpected labour sure felt refreshing to him. He took a long look at the two dazed Orcs over there and prepared to take his leave.

'Oh, right. Before that...'

He had nearly forgotten this important step. He approached the two Orcs, placed his hands on their shoulders and sent in his 'thought orders' to them. The contents were roughly the same as the ones he gave to Muffin in the past.

'Humans are your friends. If you find humans in danger, help them. If they threaten your life, then fight them but don't kill them. And make sure to educate your children well...'

Since it would be troublesome when these Orcs start fighting humans when Sae-Jin needed them later on down the line, he deeply embedded the guidelines of not harming humans in these Orcs. Of course, Vampires weren't included in that category of humans.

Finishing up the insemination of those thought orders deep inside the Orcs, Sae-Jin moved his feet to leave.

66 99

However, something kept on tugging at his mind and his feet wouldn't move easily.

It felt like that, by just making a village and telling them to survive all on their own, they would simply get themselves killed, probably as soon as tomorrow or some such.

"...Whew."

Sae-Jin ended up turning back.

He spent another hour fixing up the useless weapons of the Orcs up to the level of Branded Goods, and then by using up his own blood, inscribed several Magic Tattoos on their bodies as well.

Not only the Tattoos that increased their physical strength and agility, but the 'Leviathan's Scales' as well, in order to show that these Orcs were subordinates of the Hero Orc.

Of course, instead of actual scales, the Orcs' skins turned slightly blue as the Skill's effects were greatly curtailed during the process of imbuing, but still, since these Orcs were blue in colour, people might deduce correctly that they may have some relation to the Hero Orc. Meaning, they would attack these Orcs less.

'Now that I've done this much for you, grow up quickly and become my aid in the future.'

This was his final 'thought order'.

Kim Sae-Jin left behind the two Orcs who were on the brink of shedding tears of admiration and moved his unwilling feet.

A week passed by since the day of him forming an unlikely connection with the two Orcs.

A day before the scheduled broadcast of the TV show Yu Sae-Jung filmed, the 'Knight's Country House', Sae-Jin officially opened the shop 'Monster Artifact' built within the grounds of the Society. (TL: The author wrote the name of the shop in English.)

Although the number of items displayed for sale was only 8, each one of them had an incredible price tag. The cheapest of them all, a hairpin, cost a cool \$9 million US.

As expected, no one paid attention on the day the shop opened its doors. But after the TV show aired, the explosive reaction was enough to surprise the IT department tasked to maintaining the Society's home webpage.

However, those people inquiring about the necklace Yu Sae-Jung was wearing could only back off in utter shock after confirming the pricing.

Of course, Sohn Chul-Joon was also among these people. He thought that the necklace Yu Sae-Jung wore couldn't have cost more than a few thousand dollars, or maybe even a couple of ten thousands but then, on it...

[The Soul of a Warrior]

[Currently unavailable – 15,000,000,000 KRW] (TL: that's in Korean currency. Yes, it seems like it's a lot – in US dollars, it's \$13.682 million.)

... There was this enormous price tag attached to the necklace.

Initially, many people complained when these enormous prices were revealed, but when Kim Sae-Jin disclosed the extraordinary effects each item possessed, they all shut their mouths real fast.

Then, it was the turn of the Knights and Wizards to rush in. More than 100 Knights and Wizards came to the shop and had to receive tickets with the waiting number printed on it, all because the artifacts of The Monster could only be viewed by making a reservation as well as purchasing only on site.

"So, how was it?"

After two days of storm had passed, Yu Sae-Jung came to see him in the Chairman's office while carrying a triumphant air.

"Oh my, you've arrived, Sae-Jung?"

Sae-Jin gently stroked her head. She really enjoyed his touches that were full of affection.

"You're not gonna avoid me? But you did that to Sohn Chul-Joon, though."

After seeing her enjoy his touch like a little puppy, he suddenly remembered the scene where she was learning how to cook with Sohn Chul-Joon. It was one of the most memorable scenes in the whole show, after all. Yu Sae-Jung's indifferent attitude, which contrasted so much when she was with Sae-Jin, and the sorry sight of Sohn Chul-Joon busy chasing away imaginary mosquitos.

"Obviously... Oppa is completely different from that ahjussi... Ah, right. And Oppa," (TL: ahjussi = an old man, an uncle, etc.)

Yu Sae-Jung hurriedly rummaged through her bag, then pulled out an envelope, which she handed over to Sae-Jin.

"Mm? What is it?"

She grinned brightly.

"An invitation to my coming of age ceremony."

"...Mm?"

Sae-Jin tilted his head at her unexpected reply. Most regular people wouldn't hold one of these ceremonies, and even if they did, it would be on the days of their birth, at least that's what he'd heard of...

"Isn't your birthday 20th of April?"

Yu Sae-Jung's birthday was still a half year away. Sae-Jin spoke with that fact in mind, but she had this face of someone who was

deeply moved.

"You.... you knew?!"

"Oh, yeah. Kind of..."

Actually, it was mentioned on a TV show he watched yesterday...

But he wasn't going to mention that and break the nice little atmosphere that was forming here.

"Besides that, there's still a half year left, so why are you giving me one so early?"

"Ah... well, that is, I've decided to do the ceremony on the 1st of January. Originally, it was scheduled for my birthday... but I wanted it done earlier, so I begged my dad. Whatever, you must come, okay?"

Yu Sae-Jung grabbed his hands with a determined expression. It was a skinship that occurred naturally, but as the time passed, her face got redder and redder.

"...Got it."

Just before her face got red enough to burst open, Sae-Jin carefully extracted his hands and pocketed the invitation.

"Ah, right. Did you choose the new members for the Society?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Yeah. I just need to announce it."

The people Sae-Jin had picked were only two: Kim Yu-Sohn's son and Yi Hye-Rin. It wasn't his intention, but as he was only trying to pick the right type of people, the elimination rate ended up being a rather cruel 2000 to 1.

"Who are they~~? Please tell me~"

Yu Sae-Jung rubbed her shoulders against Sae-Jin's body and began flirting with him. Since it wasn't a secret to begin with, he honestly told her.

"...Miss Yi Hye-Rin the Knight?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Yeah. You also know her, right?"

Suddenly, Yu Sae-Jung's face froze in icy expression. But when Sae-Jin spoke in a tone indicating his belief of Hye-Rin being the right fit for the Society, she did her best to force out a smile.

"Ah... yeah. I know who she is. It's fine, I guess. She's got good abilities, so... A good choice..."

She suppressed the bitter taste rising up from her chest really hard. Her mind was uneasy, but if she showed off a strange behaviour in front of Sae-Jin, then he might see her as a small minded person.

"You think so too?"

Unfortunately, Sae-Jin was smiling relaxedly, completely unaware of her real feelings.

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27th of October.

The Monster finally announced the successful applicants to its membership recruitment, and right away, the whole world seemed to boil over simultaneously.

And towards the new members' direction, undivided attention of the public poured in like a hailstorm.

It was fine for Yi Hye-Rin who was used to public's attention, but for Kim Sun-Ho, the son of Kim Yu-Sohn, things were quite different.

Since he retired from being a Knight and changed his job to that of a Mercenary, reporters went after his story like crazy; in the end, he had to temporarily take residence on the night-duty room of the Society's headquarters which prohibited the entry of outsiders.

"Wow. This is sooo big. Mister Chairman, please take a look~"

A certain afternoon on a weekend, while the media frenzy was still ongoing outside.

As the group finished up training and were enjoying a meal together at the cafeteria within the HQ, Yi Hye-Rin raised a fuss and placed her mobile phone on the dining table.

"Hey, Joo Ji-Hyuk, you too." (Yi Hye-Rin)

"...What is it now?"

Joo Ji-Hyuk, who was sitting next to Yi Hye-Rin, turned his gaze towards the projected images from the phone while his face reddened for some reason.

Four Mid Tier Knights were in the middle of investigating the changes to the land, and found themselves surrounded by Monsters and in real danger. But then, two blue-skinned Orcs jumped out of nowhere and helped the Knights to defeat the Monsters. And after the battle concluded, these Orcs even gave the Knights some drinking water and then disappeared to somewhere.

So, the protagonists of this footage were... those two blue Orcs.

"...Huh?"

Every scene he just saw was enough to almost make Sae-Jin spit out the food in his mouth.

"Wasn't that so mysterious? This footage is doing the rounds in my Raven Order's community chat rooms, saying they were the Hero Orc's fellow tribe mates. For now, this story's being buried under the Society's member recruitment news, but soon, don't you think it's going to cause a huge stir later on?"

Seeing the smiling face of the totally oblivious Yi Hye-Rin, Sae-Jin could just barely nod his head in agreement.

< 21. A New Starting Point (3) > Fin.

Chapter 72: Preparation (1)

"If Miss Kim Yu-Rin joins our Society, then, well – I may end up reviewing the case with a far more open mind."

Inside the newly constructed office of the Chairman of The Monster, located in their central headquarters.

Sae-Jin was having a business-related meeting with Kim Yu-Rin.

"That is... I'd also love to join you. But I am unable to stay as long as the duration you have put forward. I believe that it will be better to not cause an inconvenience by breaking the rule of '10 years or longer'. That is why I ask of your gracious understanding on this matter...."

Yu-Rin came over to speak to him personally regarding two business matters this day.

One was to find out the current state of things regarding the Athany doll version 2.0, which, under the pretext of checking out the technical capabilities of the potential buyers, still hadn't found a home yet. The other was to purchase a certain artifact now available in the Society's new Artifact store.

The artifact in question was an obsidian bracelet called [Wolf's Claws.]

In addition to enhancing the overall power of its wearer, this mysterious artifact had an on/off hidden function that, when activated, would transform into a gauntlet that covered the entire hand.

As its name suggested, it was truly an item that morphed into the so-called 'Wolf's Claws'.

Although this artifact had a seemingly ridiculous price tag of over \$17 million US, in truth, it was not as expensive as one might think since an artifact designed for combat would be rotated among the Knights through a 'hiring' system.

Plus, with its already-proven effects of enhancing the wearer's strength and endurance by nearly 30%, as well as the warranty period of 30 years added on top, it was not an exaggeration to say the price was on the low side if one considered the guaranteed profit made with it – not to mention the protection offered by equipping this bracelet as well.

"In that case, I guess it can't be helped, but... But please, do consider it some more. Our doors will always remain open for you."

He licked his lips at this missed opportunity.

Sae-Jin had this one more plan he wanted to carry out. And that plan was to buy a bit more land near the Monster field in Gangwon Province to expand the boundaries of his Society and then, form a Knights Order of his own which would fall under the jurisdiction of the Society.

Of course, this idea didn't come out of Sae-Jin's head but it was the planning department that suggested it instead.

Even though the initial costs involved with the recruitment of manpower, construction of the premises and lobbying the relevant government entities would run into hundreds of millions of dollars, not to mention another tens of millions for the annual operating budget alone, Sae-Jin still wanted to pursue this idea to the fullest.

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"Uhm... then, is our meeting over?"
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"Yes."

When Kim Yu-Rin cautiously inquired, Sae-Jin indifferently replied back.

""

Her irides began to tremble.

All she got in reply from him regarding the Athany doll version

2.0 was "I'll think about it". Not only she couldn't get a definite confirmation, this couldn't even be called a positive understanding between them. But still, that didn't mean she could just join his Society now.

"Perhaps it's time for you to return?"

Actually, Sae-Jin was aiming precisely for this moment. Even if Kim Yu-Rin joined his Society, the chance of her becoming the Order Master of his Knights Order was slimmer than slim. But even with that, she was still the kind of Knight he'd want to have working for him.

"I, I still have something else to say!!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin hurriedly shouted out when she saw Sae-Jin stand up from his seat to seemingly show her way out.

He sat back down on his seat for the time being.

"What would you like to discuss?"

"I've heard that The Monster has recently started an entertainment company as well."

"Yes, that is correct."

About a month ago, at the behest of the planning department, Sae-Jin began pursuing a new revenue model – the so-called talent management company.

The planning department strongly suggested for this business venture, as the current members of the Society, besides Yu Sae-Jung and Yi Hye-Rin, were already huge attention drawers themselves. On top of that, he could use the equipment provided as a bait to make other Knights join the company, too.

And only after a month of operation, The Monster Entertainment was going from strength to strength. There was no point in mentioning the two that were practically top stars to begin with – Yu Sae-Jung and Yi Hye-Rin; it was now at the point

where the famous celebrities, after being attracted by the halo of The Monster, were inquiring about signing a contract with Sae-Jin's company.

"I, Kim Yu-Rin, would like to sign up with your company."

"....Oh. Is that so?"

Yu-Rin made this decision with quite a difficulty, yet Sae-Jin's reaction was lukewarm at best. At that moment, she briefly wondered whether her worth had become insignificant all of a sudden.

"By the way, You should inquire with the related department's head, instead of me, you know." (Kim Sae-Jin)

"...Eh? No, that's not... Well, I... uh, my appearance fee is \$27000 US, per episode..."

"Ah, really? Miss Sae-Jung's is around \$23000, actually. It's pretty close."

With a sneaky smile on his face, Sae-Jin provoked Yu-Rin.

"Is, is that right? Only a \$4000 difference... Ah... However, I have not done much broadcasting work, that is why. So, if you allow me to sign up, then I give you my promise that I will work extra hard and widen the gap between me and Miss Sae-Jung..."

And so, she bit the bait rather beautifully.

*

The beginning of December, with the first snow still waiting to fall.

As soon as The Monster's Society ranking rose up from B-to B when the success of its various business ventures were publicly acknowledged, suddenly from seemingly everywhere, several hostile attempts to keep its growth in check came forth.

Petty schemes such as endlessly delaying the issuing of business permits while nitpicking over nothing, issuing fines that ran up to millions of dollars on the grounds of not following the environmental protection laws, and even spreading false rumours of him speculating on real estate prices...

"Judging by the current circumstances, we strongly suspect that several large corporations and Trilogy have joined hands together, but... we can not be 100% certain." (Jo Hahn-Sung)

And so, Sae-Jin ended up creating a dedicated response team. Somehow, he had developed a personality where he could not stand back and accept defeats.

"...Really? I understand. For now, let us wait until we can find more concrete evidence."

But since getting angry was akin to admitting that he had lost, Sae-Jin maintained as much level-headedness as humanly possible.

"But you're certain that Trilogy is involved?"

"Yes, sir. There is evidence of one of that Society's directors lobbying the related parties."

It was most likely that Trilogy didn't care for one bit about their stronghold on the top spot of South Korea's Society rankings being threatened by anyone.

It was almost understandable as the mass media that loved to pit others for a juicy fight was already comparing the histories of both Trilogy and The Monster side by side so there was that, but still, what that Society had done was quite a dirty and cheap trick.

"Oh, and Mister Chairman, should we submit our Guild registration as well?"

"Yes, of course."

A 'Guild'. A law proposed half a year ago had went into effect just last week, finally establishing the concept of Guilds officially in the Republic of Korea.

In the layman's terms, a Guild was the evolved form of a Society.

A Society with a Class higher than B was given the chance to advance to a Guild, and after going through three months of complicated testing procedures and proving it can become a Guild without an issue, it would be officially recognised as one.

The First World countries in Western Europe, the United States as well as many other nations had already adopted this system, but Korea was only implementing it now due to several overlapping reasons.

In actual truth, The Monster's contribution in getting this law enacted belatedly in Korea was great.

The backstory surrounding this law was like this:

The Dawn dynasty, which did not enjoy an amiable relationship with Trilogy for some reason, spent an exorbitant amount of money lobbying against the Guild system. The Dawn had already found Trilogy threatening, yet with the implementation of this system, they knew their enemy's influence would only strengthen further.

It was then, a new Society co-founded by Yu Sae-Jung called The Monster entered into the fray like a new star, which meant that it would be friendly towards the Dawn's interests. And so, the Dawn decided to divert the enormous lobbying funds to support the development of The Monster that would become the dark horse to oppose Trilogy.

The disappearance of the Dawn's lobbying efforts meant that the 'Guild Law' ended up smoothly passing with little trouble.

Obviously, there was no guarantee that The Monster would be able to become a Guild just because the law came into effect. First of all, many high ranking directors of the corporations unfriendly towards the Dawn were members of Trilogy as well, so it was likely that they would resort to even nastier and dirtier schemes from now on.

"And by the way, sir. There is one more item still left on the agenda."

"Another one? Hu-uh... Our people must be getting really busy nowadays, I'm guessing?"

The continuing parade of reports that lasted nearly three hours so far – Kim Sae-Jin rubbed his head which was getting dizzy from mental fatigue.

The administrative work for the Society had increased by that much.

The number of employees now easily exceeded three digits after he repeatedly hired new people due to the shortage of manpower. Three new departments were established, with each department now having on an average 23 employees, 4 times the size compared to only 3 months ago.

The annual budget set aside just for salaries was almost \$20 million, but just like he promised to himself, Kim Sae-Jin was not stingy when it came to spending on people.

The fact of his employees being treated well naturally spread around and so, when one of those rare opportunities to get hired by The Monster came around, CVs sent in by those working in the prominent local companies as well as famous overseas corporations could be found every now and then.

"Haha. It is quite alright, sir. The individually assigned sleeping quarters are better than some regular houses, so it's not much of a problem to pull an all-nighter for us."

"It can't be helped under the current circumstances as there are just too much work to go through, but as soon as things quieten down, please make sure to go home at the correct time, please."

"Yes, sir. I understand. And now, we need your decision on the technical department's..."

Jo Hahn-Sung continued on with his report.

"Oppa, what are you thinking about now?"

"....Mm?"

Sae-Jin was currently with Yu Sae-Jung in a restaurant. Although the work was tough and he still felt dizzy, but he just couldn't ignore the sad light in her eyes.

"Ah! You were thinking of Miss Kim Yu-Rin, right? I heard you had a meeting with her yesterday."

As if her jealousy was kicking in again, Yu Sae-Jung's lips pouted and her eyes narrowed to a slit.

"That's not true at all. It's just that... I'm kinda tired today."

As he had spent 4 hours out of 7 he could stay as a Human purely listening to reports, reading many documents and making decisions, it was understandable he would be exhausted by now.

"...Are you going home right away, even today?"

"Yeah. My bad."

"And I'm still forever barred from going to Oppa's place?"

"That's par for the course, you know. You haven't even graduated from a high school yet, but you want to go to a house of a man who lives alone..."

With a deeply sulking expression, Yu Sae-Jung began roughly chewing on the steak.

Chomp, chomp.

She resembled an angry puppy for some reason, so she didn't look all that threatening to him.

"...Ah! I just remembered. Oppa, would you like to come to my graduation ceremony?"

Even though they had agreed to address each other informally, she had this strange habit of using honorifics whenever she asked him for a favour.

"Mm? Isn't it usually the family members attending such things?"

Yu Sae-Jung smiled sadly at his question. He then quickly realised his mistake. If her family was going, then she'd not have the reason to invite him in the first place.

"My dad's too busy, my grandpa is also busy because it's the yearend, my divorced mom's whereabouts are unknown, and since I'm the only child, I don't have any siblings, you see. That's why there is no one to show up, except for you, Oppa."

She seemed calm, but Sae-Jin couldn't say anything after detecting a hint of sadness hidden in her voice.

"Will you... come?"

There was no need to delay his answer. As soon as he nodded his head...

"...Thank you."

Yu Sae-Jung looked into his eyes and smiled bravely. But Sae-Jin thought that smile looked lonely as well. That is why, he shifted his hand resting on top of the table and quietly held hers.

'Hell yeah!'

Meanwhile, she was inwardly shouting out in happiness.

There was indeed someone who could come to her graduation ceremony – the butler, Park Hyun-Oh. However, he would not be able to make it anymore.

*

"I'm thankful for everything you've done for me." (Kim Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin and Yu Sae-Jung smiled as they looked at each other.

"You're really thankful?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

It was a question with a hidden meaning.

When Sae-Jin tilted his head in confusion, Yu Sae-Jung sneakily approached his front. And then, not even giving him a chance to say no, she ambushed him with a tight embrace.

"...What the?"

"It's a farewell hug. They all do in the West, you know. That's why I... If you are really thankful, stay like this for a little while longer...."

Yu Sae-Jung leaned her head on his chest. Her fatigue and worries were all gone, just like that, and her mind became more comfortable. When she was in his arms, fully enjoying his pleasant scent with all her body... nothing in this world would be able to make her feel envious.

"Don't just stand there... Oppa hug me too."

She looked up at him with a gentle eyes.

Her affectionate eyes and sincere voice.

He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her in even tighter.

*

On the following day, Sae-Jin secretly summoned the 'manager' of the Mercenary Company, Kim Yu-Sohn. It was to discuss the deployment of 13 Mercenaries and 20 intelligence operatives affiliated with his Company.

"Of course, I'll leave the direction of our future to your discretion, Mister Chairman."

Kim Yu-Sohn smiled warmly.

Currently, The Monster Mercenary Company was being inundated with all the job requests coming in. First of all, there was only one properly organised Mercenary Company in the entire world which just so happened to be Sae-Jin's; so the fault of overwhelming workload laid with the inevitable obtainment of the

title 'Best In The World'.

"Then, putting the Mercenary matters to a side for now, how goes the training of the intelligence operatives?"

"It's going well. They are training hard as we speak in techniques such as putting on disguise, moving in stealth as well as forging identity documents at The Monster Intelligence Agency's underground base constructed under your orders."

Calling it The Monster Intelligence Agency sounded a bit embarrassing and all that, but Sae-Jin really needed this organization right now.

"...Are they ready to enter real combat situations?"

"The six out of the twenty, those whom you have identified as 'Agents with rich golden auras' are now skilled enough for that purpose. And even though it's nominally a real combat situation, it's still nothing more than searching for the right hotels, sir, so I believe it should be good to give them this opportunity."

Forming his own intelligence gathering agency was without a doubt, very illegal, so he had to be extra careful. But still...

"Understood. Then, for the moment, have those six deployed to the field."

"Yes, sir."

Their aim was to find the hotel where the future ruler of the Vampires was hiding in. Hesitation was no longer an option.

< 22. Preparation (1) > Fin.

Chapter 73: Preparation (2)

There was only one suite on the top – 60th – floor of the Gangwon Province's most luxurious hotel, 'Romance of Dawn'. And to stay here even for one single night, an enormous fee was required, meaning this place would forever remain out of reach for the regular folks. (TL: The author wrote the name of the hotel in actual English.)

But currently, this top floor had transformed into a base camp solely to serve one person. Not just the 60th floor, either – the five floors below it, from 55th to 59th, as well. Hundreds of magic traps, detection spells, as well as numerous 'Undeads' hidden in the shadows were quietly waiting for potential visits from unwelcome intruders.

Although everything looked business as usual at a casual glance, it was in a way, a perfectly constructed fortress designed to kill any who dared to intrude.

"Are all the preparations ready?"

And the master of this 'fortress' was the possessor of the most noble bloodline, 'Prillrani von Bathory'. (TL: "프릴라니 본 바토리" Yeah, me too... shrugs shoulders)

The last descendant of the House Bathory which was reputed to be the progenitor of the Vampire race, she was also seen as the most likely candidate to become the future empress of the race. On the covertly-operating Vampire community chat rooms, many lamented that if this Bathory girl was smart, no, if she had an ounce of desire in her to learn something new, then they may have went back home a long time ago.

"Yes, my lady. The preparations are almost complete. Although a few inferior races tried to delay us, starting from next week, we will be engaging in the 'expulsion' operation right away." This 'expulsion' was the term used for extracting Monsters hidden within the portal.

"Is that so. Very good."

Bathory smiled gloomily.

"Ah. But what is 'el Las' doing right now? They still have not made any contacts yet." (TL: "엘 라스")

In the not too distant past, during the days of the mass racial extermination, the noble households were targeted the most; and only two managed to preserve their bloodlines from that chaos – 'Bathory' and 'el Las'.

Of course, the power of the el Las household was comparably much weaker than that of the Bathory's, and not to mention, their current leader was just a little kid but still, that family wasn't some bad joke that could be safely ignored.

First of all, although the 'Vampire Emperor' was a mighty existence that ruled over all of Vampires, the thing was, in order to become one, he or she didn't have to be the possessor of the strongest power or the smartest of brains.

"Those fools had tried to open a portal in the past, but after their efforts had gone down the drain, it looks like they are being mindful of us, we who have achieved success sooner than them, my lady. But if it's not that, then perhaps, since their lord is too young, they may have a fear of being absorbed by us, instead."

"Heu-Mm. Really? They have become cowards, haven't they? How unfortunate. Why continue on living, if you're going to exist like that?"

Bathory's chilly question became a mysterious cold aura that embraced the male Vampire's body.

"...You... you're absolutely correct, my lady..."

"Oh, right. What about... those trash?"

Whenever Bathory thought about those inferior bastards she referred to as 'trash', the fury she repressed deep down in her heart tried to break free. The abominable remnants that were closer to Monsters than to Vampires – those vile things she'd like to exterminate even before the human race, if possible.

"Ahh... Those 'trash' have shown no signs of activity after holing themselves up within the 'Sanctuary' of late, but that only makes us more concerned, my lady."

The 'trash', also known as 'Nosferatu'. (TL: Huh. Really.)

Their bloodlines possessed excellent abilities but they were still categorised as Monsters. And with the history of them betraying their own species in the distant past, Nosferatus were never acknowledged as the Vampire's kin that shared the same ancestors.

Known to be the most twisted and vile even among the Vampire species, these Nosferatus suffered from inferiority complex – or from victim mentality – and they carried out insidious plots regardless of who their targets were. That was why the majority of Vampires believed that the previous racial cleansing happened because the Nosferatus instigated humans to take actions.

What supported this notion was the fact that Nosferatus didn't suffer any fallout from the cleansing while countless Vampires and their noble bloodlines were killed; and now, they had grown to the point where they could legitimately challenge for the position of the Vampire Emperor.

"Haa... What are those accursed bastards scheming on now, I wonder..."

One of those trash as the emperor? What a nonsensical notion that was. Bathory's teeth gritted in fury.

"Chief Suterte seems to be cooking up some kind of a scheme, my lady, but... our spies lacked the capabilities to defeat those bastards. All our soldiers could find was the location of their Sanctuary and the living conditions inside."

"Heu-Mm. By the way, you haven't thought of any other plans besides taking them head-on, have you?"

"...P, pardon?"

"You didn't, did you?"

Bathory glared at the man as if he was a pathetic fool.

"Hey, you. Have you ever heard of a tactic where you don't use your own strength but use another party to destroy your enemies?" (TL: the author used a Chinese – I guess it's Korean, too – idiom called "이이제이". Couldn't really think of an suitable English alternative to replace it. Sorry.)

When Bathory suddenly brought up a certain 'four-letter idiom' (TL: see above) the guy became dazed for a short time. He was thinking, just when did this empty-headed girl who had never even touched a book in her life hit her head and come up an idea like this?!

"What is the meaning of your expression?! Are you perchance courting death?"

"No, no that's not it, my lady! This servant does not know the meaning of those words so I was thinking carefully about it, I swear!"

Bathory's head might be empty but she was supernaturally quick on the uptake, and the guy quickly planted his forehead on the ground to grovel before her.

"...Is that so? In that case, fine. I shall forgive you this time, since you didn't know."

She then proceeded to explain the meaning of her words as well as the historical origins of it. Of course, she got over half of it totally wrong, but the guy did not possess the necessary cojones to point that out.

"So, the thing is, I brought it up because... I learned it after watching TV a lot lately."

A Bathory watched TV? The guy looked up at her with a slightly moved expression.

"You know Lycan, right? The b*****d that goes around poking us with a stick. I heard that he has established his own Mercenary Company. On top of that, there's a white tiger called Yu Baek-Song busy running around here in this country, right?"

"...Ahhh."

The guy immediately figured it out. Of course, he could see a lot of holes in this plan, but still, he somehow managed to pull off the expression of how surprised he was at this method's greatness.

"Instead of causing harm, wouldn't those bastards disappearing at the same time help out with our plans?" (Prillrani von Bathory)

An eerie, yet pure grin drew up on Bathory's lips.

"This servant understands. This servant shall use a pawn to lodge a job request to Lycan for the time being."

"Very good. You may be dumb, but it's good that your head works fast."

Bathory smiled in satisfaction and waved her hand; then the man backtracked quickly and disappeared from her sight.

*

On 29th of December, three days before the end of the year. (TL: Lol, really, Sherlock?!)

Kim Sae-Jin went to speak to Hazeline.

"...A potion or a magic spell to suppress lust...?" (Hazeline)

This was his most pressing issue currently. The d**n sexual desire that boiled at almost every opportunity, whether it was during training, sparring, speaking to Yi Hye-Rin, Yu Sae-Jung, or

for that matter, any other women...

"Yes."

Unfortunately, the Goblin's knowledge base did not contain a recipe for such a potion. Probably it was par for the course, since Monsters didn't have what one would call 'reason'.

"Uhm... I haven't heard of anything like that, either..." (Hazeline)

Hazeline took a glance at Sae-Jin's current appearance and then, carefully pulled her clothes in tighter. When he looked at her as if he couldn't believe what she was doing, Hazeline let out a fake cough.

"Keum, keum. Is it, uh, difficult to manage currently? That place... down there."

"...Yes, it's a little difficult."

"Oh, if that's the case, I'll search for one. Since you can find all sorts of bizarre potions out there, there might be one like that."

Hazeline pulled out a mini laptop.

"...Should I wait?"

"Mm? Nope. You don't have to stick around if you're busy right now. This might take some time, after all."

Kim Sae-Jin nodded his head and stood up to leave.

*

- Finally, the old year has passed and the new year begins~!!

The noises of fireworks and bells loudly spread all around, signaling the beginning of the new year.

However, quite unlike the joyous laughters of everyone else, Kim Sae-Jin in his Ebony Wolf Form was going through a difficult dilemma at this very moment.

The cause was a certain alert window that rose up yesterday

when he finished creating yet another 'Dark Energy Link'.

[All conditions to evolve into the Lycanthrope has been satisfied. It's now possible to evolve into the Lycanthrope.]

[Warning: A Lycanthrope is a Human but at the same time, a Monster. So if the host chooses to evolve, the Human Form and the Ebony Wolf Form will merge together. Other Monster Forms will remain the same.]

[The time available to stay as a 'Human' will increase to a minimum of 12 hours once evolved into the Lycanthrope. Depending on the numerical value of the Stat, 'Energy Manipulation', the length of the time available will increase further.]

"...Fuu..."

The Ebony Wolf Form and the Human Form merging together – that was the same thing as the Kim Sae-Jin of now disappearing forever.

He couldn't make such a decision half-heartedly at all.

And he felt quite idiotic for believing that his evolution would solve all of his problems.

What a dilemma this was turning out to be.

As the time passed, the instincts of the Orc boiled over more and more, but he couldn't evolve just to solve this issue – because, he had no idea what would happen to the 'human Kim Sae-Jin'. And even if he did evolve, then the instincts of Lycanthrope would become the next headache to overcome.

Obviously, the best answer in this situation was to grow the Human Form Kim Sae-Jin until he could contend with the Orc Great Warrior Form. Even that was proving problematic due to the boiling instincts of the Orc lately, as his base desires threatened to go out of control whenever he moved his body...

SFX for a mobile phone ringing

He got distracted from the ever-deepening worries by the sound of the phone ringing. Frowning slightly, he glared at the LCD display.

- Yu Sae-Jung.

"Ah, right."

Her coming of age ceremony. He only remembered it now.

"...Ha-ahh..."

He sighed out grandly and answered the phone.

- "Oppa~~ I'm finally an adult~~"

"...Really? Congrats."

Yu Sae-Jung's voice sounded especially bright on the phone.

But with his thought process all messily tangled up, he could only find her slightly bothersome at the moment.

*

"...Under the Geumgang Mountain?"

6 o'clock in the evening. Before attending Yu Sae-Jung's coming of age ceremony, Sae-Jin stopped by at The Monster's HQ when Kim Yu-Sohn called him in hurry.

"That is correct. According to the anonymous tip, an underground base for Vampires can be found there. It's not verified yet but an evidence with strong persuasive power was enclosed together with the tip. Mister Chairman, shall we deploy our agents?"

Kim Sae-Jin studied the evidence provided. It was a bunch of photographs depicting an unidentified village constructed underground. A grey city where not a single ray of sunlight would be able to enter.

"...Does it look like the SID knows about this place?"

"It doesn't, no. If they knew, then they might have raised a ruckus. And in truth... the SID isn't going to exterminate these Vampires – you are well aware of this fact, I believe. Also, that is the reason why this anonymous tip provider requested us with this job and not the SID."

The tool Sae-Jin created and Yu Baek-Song's nose could sniff out a Vampire. However, humans caught in the high-level seduction magic of Vampires became pawns, not realising that they were under the influence of such magic.

"Fuu... I understand. Let me talk to Yu Baek-Song first. And as it's dangerous, delay the deployment of our agents for now."

"Yes sir. And Mister Chairman, I'd like the permission to track down this anonymous informant as well."

"The informant?"

Kim Yu-Sohn nodded his head.

*

Yu Sae-Jung's coming of age ceremony took place within the huge mansion of the Dawn household.

As expected of the Dawn, it truly was a grand banquet. It was not an exaggeration to say the true movers and shakers of Korea had all gathered here in this banquet hall – leaders of the politics and financial worlds, famous Knights and celebrities, etc, etc.

However, Yu Sae-Jung was nervously waiting for the arrival of one specific person.

"Hyun-Oh Oppa, Sae-Jin Oppa hasn't arrived yet, right?"

"Yeah. He did call to say that he might be running a bit late, but promised to be here, so don't worry."

••••

Yu Sae-Jung tightly shut her mouth. The main event of the ceremony had ended already. She had placed the hairstick in her

hair now, and the people were too busy building profitable personal connections without a rest. (TL: As far as I can tell, putting a hairstick means a girl is now officially an adult in the Korean tradition. Not sure how accurate this is, but there you go.)

Definitely, without his presence here, this whole ceremony was a total waste of time for her.

"How do you do, Miss Yu Sae-Jung?"

The guy approaching her while carrying an oily smile was Kim Jong-Hyuk, the third son of the owner of the corporation that rivaled Dawn, the Great Wisdom. (TL: I thought of leaving the name in romanised Korean as this name may never appear again, but its spelling could confuse some readers with other similarly-named persons so I changed it to English equivalent. I know it sounds weird, but bear with me on this one.)

He was a loser well known for his unchecked, wild behaviour and his current appearance of trying to look all important and grownup seemed rather pathetic to Yu Sae-Jung.

"Hello."

At Sae-Jung's terse reply, Kim Jong-Hyuk's eyebrows went into a slight spasm. However, he continued on with his words, not looking perturbed at all.

"It seems that person is not attending your coming of age ceremony? As there were stories of him being in a special relationship with Miss Sae-Jung, I was really looking forward to meeting him here today. I even heard a rumour that you two exited a car together late at night, even. Of course, I also hear that person for some reason is refusing to go all the way."

This time, it was Yu Sae-Jung's face to harden. She wondered just who the heck invited this son of a bi*ch. She felt like blaming her dad who insisted on sending invitations to everyone out of common courtesy.

"You can keep your unnecessary remarks to yourself as he will come. Don't you worry." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Hmph. I'm sure that he's very busy nowadays. I mean, everyone's heard of the rumour that both his Trait and his business acumen is simply extraordinary."

As The Monster's value continued to soar higher, the world praised Sae-Jin's abilities.

Of course, all he had done was to 'only' recruit those people with overflowing potential and create an environment where these folks could fully unleash their strengths.

The true reason for The Monster's continued advancement was the countless employees who had become the pillars of his Society, as they thoroughly displayed their sharp intuition and excellent abilities with the aid of the encouraging environment.

But whether a business was successful or not, it was the chairman of the company who always came under the spotlight. That was why, before anyone knew it, Sae-Jin had become the genius businessman the attention of the people of Korea was focused on.

"...I too am well aware of that. Even if he's a bit late in coming, I'm still grateful."

"Oh? But you seemed rather... very anxious for that. Maybe I saw it all wrong?"

When Kim Jong-Hyuk mouthed the words of clear ridicule, Sae-Jung clenched both of her fists and breathed out angrily.

But this guy opened up his mouth again before she could calm herself down.

"How unfortunate. I wanted to converse with him at least once. But it looks like he may never show up..."

Yu Sae-Jung gritted her teeth.

But it was then.

The huge doors of the banquet hall suddenly swung open.

< 22. Preparation (2) > Fin.

Chapter 74: Preparation (3)

Through the abruptly-opened gaps of the banquet hall's doors, a man made his entrance.

The elegant and smooth tuxedo that perfectly wrapped around his tall and athletic physique; the neat and tidy hair combed upwards to accentuate his manly countenance; the sharp eyes and facial features reminding one of a wolf.

After searching around the banquet hall, he found Yu Sae-Jung and then he began to slowly walk up towards her. As he took step after step, getting closer and closer, her cheeks became redder and redder.

"Sae-Jung."

Finally stopping before her, Kim Sae-Jin smiled deeply as they gazed at each other.

"I'm sorry for being a bit late."

His charming baritone voice seemed to reverberate through the banquet hall, making her to dazedly nod her head.

"Is everything over already?" (Kim Sae-Jin)

"Eh? N, no... not yet. It hasn't ended yet..."

Even though she had known him for the past year or so, this was the very first time she saw him wear a tuxedo like this.

Maybe that was the problem – she just couldn't get used how cool he looked today and her eyes hurriedly lowered to the floor in bashfulness.

"Oh-ho. So you are that famous Mister Kim Sae-Jin?"

After watching the two interact with much interest, Kim Jong-Hyuk reached out for a handshake.

"I'm Director Kim Jong-Hyuk from the Great Wisdom

Electronics."

"Oh. Hello, pleased to meet you. I'm Kim Sae-Jin."

While shaking hands, Sae-Jin checked out this guy's disposition with the Eyes of the Wolf. And almost immediately, he nearly ended up taking a big step back. A powerfully turbid and dark energy was oozing out from this man, Kim Jong-Hyuk. Sae-Jin hadn't seen the colour this dark before until now.

"Hahaha. Now that I have met you in person, you look much more handsome than in those videos and photographs."

Kim Jong-Hyuk yapped on and on, but Sae-Jin didn't want to spend another minute with this guy, if he could help it. So, he was about to ignore this Jong-Hyuk person and have a chat with Yu Sae-Jung, when...

"Uh~ Isn't this a pleasant surprise! Aren't you the last born son of the Great Wisdom Corporation's owner?"

"Ohh, it's good to see you again, Cabinet Minister! It's been a while."

...People began gathering around Sae-Jin. These guys used Kim Jong-Hyuk as an excuse to make their approach, and to build a friendly connection with Sae-Jin, began paying the obligatory lip service.

But maybe this was the case of 'birds of a feather flocking together' or 'touching a pitch will get a man filthy', every single one gathered here had their moral compass leaning heavily towards the side of evil. Of course, none of them were as bad as Kim Jong-Hyuk, but still.

"So, this gentleman here is that famed Mister Kim Sae-Jin, yes? How do you do. I'm the Minister in charge of the Home Affairs..."

"Why, yes. Hello to you too, sir. By the way, who is that next to you?"

Sae-Jin, who had become the centre of attention in this crowd, inexplicably pointed at the secretary of the man who just introduced himself as a government minister. It was because this young man was too talented and good natured to be next to this dirty b*****d.

"Ah, his name is Kim Ho-Hyung. He's my secretary but the kid's not all that smart. He's the son of a servant who has been working for me for a long time. Under the pretext of promising him a good future, I'm taking him along with me."

When the nameless government minister let out a guffaw, the rest of the crowd began laughing as well. All of it were as fake as a laugh could get.

Kim Sae-Jin no longer wished to stay here. He slightly turned his head and checked out Yu Sae-Jung's mood.

She seemed to have the exact same thoughts as he did, as she nodded her head slightly.

"Oh. But I'm suffering from slight migraine at the moment. Maybe because I've been swarmed with work lately..." (Kim Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin started feigning illness while massaging his head.

"Haha. That's all very understandable. Nowadays, there isn't any business sector The Monster hasn't entered yet, after all. Even His Excellency have spoken about it as well." (The minister)

"When you say 'His Excellency', you mean..."

"Of course, it's Mister President, who else could it be?"

While they were busy yapping and laughing by themselves, Sae-Jin searched his inner pocket and pulled out something that gleamed under the light.

It was a 'business card' with the words [Kim Sae-Jin, The Society Chairman, The Monster] engraved on it. But it was no ordinary

card. Made by flattening pure gold as thinly as possible, each one of these cards cost as much as \$650.

Sae-Jin made these not because he wanted to show off, but only after deciding to give them only to those people who might be of some help, and those who could help him out in the future.

"Oh-ho? And what could that be?" (Unnamed minister)

There were signs of avarice twinkling in the eyes of the minister who had caught the sight of this business card.

"It's a business card."

"Aha. So that's your card. I also saw it once in a newspaper. I heard that you don't give that to just anyone... But, is that really made out of pure gold?"

The government minister, under the false impression that he was the recipient of the card, triumphantly straightened his back.

"Yes, it is pure gold."

The surrounding gallery of people let out an exclamation of admiration while gazing at the business card.

The minister let out a fake cough, and while tidying up the outline of his tie, he eagerly waited for the card to enter his hand.

"Sir, I'm envious," said Kim Jong-Hyuk, humouring the unnamed minister with a fake smile. The minister reciprocated with a spirited chuckle.

"Huhuhuh. As expected of the most outstanding young man of his generation, you have good eyes for people."

But, right next moment...

Kim Sae-Jin handed the card over not to the government minister, but to his secretary standing a slight distance away from the crowd.

"What is your name?" (Kim Sae-Jin)

"...Eh? Excuse me?"

"Your name. Or do you have a business card of your own?"

"Ahh... My name is Kim Ho-Hyung. I, I don't have a business card..."

Sae-Jin nodded his head and placed his gold card in this person's hand.

"You should give me a call later." (Kim Sae-Jin)

After saying these words, Sae-Jin left the banquet hall only after 20 minutes had passed.

" "

The minister dumbfoundedly followed the back of Sae-Jin, before viciously staring at the golden business card in Kim Ho-Hyung's hands.

It wasn't all that difficult to read his intentions within that gaze, but Ho-Hyung just quietly pocketed the card inside his suit.

"This... this son of a mere servant is..."

The minister stared at his secretary with eyes that could kill.

Unfortunately for him, he could not display any more of his anger in front of these many people.

*

Sae-Jin was planning to go home after he escaped the banquet hall, but he just couldn't ignore the pleading eyes of Yu Sae-Jung who had followed him outside.

"What is it? Is there a place you want to go?" (Kim Sae-Jin)

"I want to go to Oppa's place."

""

He gripped the steering wheel of his car tightly while glaring at her.

"What's wrong? I can't go anywhere else while wearing this dress, anyway. It'll be too embarrassing..."

Yu Sae-Jung spoke while slightly lifting the hems of her dress. As his cheeks blushed a little at the exposure of her white skin underneath, Sae-Jin checked the time remaining for his Human Form.

3 hours, 3 minutes and 59 seconds.

However, in three hours, it'd be midnight and the time remaining would reset to the beginning.

In other words, there was plenty of time left.

"I'm an adult who went through a coming of age ceremony now... Can't we just enjoy dinner together?"

Yu Sae-Jung didn't miss the opening created when he was in a dilemma, and gently wrapped her hand over his.

*

"Wow. It's so neat and tidy."

Finally entering Sae-Jin's home that she had dreamed about, her eyes went completely round as she took in the layout of the interior. (TL: ??? Didn't she already come to his house before to get her tats? What gives?)

"I'm telling you this again, you are going back to your place for sleep. Got it?"

"Argh. I got it already. I'm not Cinderella, you know... When it's past the midnight, I'll leave even if you beg me not to."

She took a quick glance at Sae-Jin, and then sat down on the living room's couch.

"It's really soft and comfortable. What are you doing, Oppa? Don't just stand there and take a seat right here."

Yu Sae-Jung vigorously patted on the empty space right next to

her. Sae-Jin approached her with slightly awkward steps.

"Ta-dah!!"

As soon as he sat down, she proudly presented the paper bag she'd been carrying since before climbing into his car.

"What is that?"

"It's alcohol."

"...Huh?"

Sae-Jin's forehead creased in that moment, but Yu Sae-Jung's smiles only grew even brighter.

*

One hour after the drinking began suddenly.

The bottle of hard liquor with the alcohol content of 57% was already quite empty.

"...Really, Oppa iss jusst too~ much. Oppa, do ya kno' why eiii wanted that ce-re-mo-ny on 1st January?"

Yu Sae-Jung, with her face bright red, let out a grand sigh. She had drank so much, even her breath smelled thickly of alcohol now.

"Oppa also kno', right? How much I like Oppa. There'sss no waaay you don't kno'. Noooo waaay.... Me. Oppa ev'ryday sings and siiiings, 'adult, adult!!' soo, I gotta haves that adult ceremony on January first..."

"It's time for you to go home. Let me drive you there."

"Will ya jussst listen, till the end. Me don kno' why I like Oppa also... kyakk!!"

Kim Sae-Jin snatched away the glass from her hand. As if she got irritated by that, Yu Sae-Jung clenched her fist and lightly hit his chest.

"Eii! I'm not going home! Imma live here forever!! It's sooo

irritatin' when ya pretend to not notice it, so Imma gonna live here."

"Fuu..."

This time, it was Kim Sae-Jin's turn to let out a sigh.

This couldn't go on. He needed to send her home now, so there would be no regrets later.

So, he stood up first.

"Me, I really did everything Oppa asked me for, and I helped out every time Oppa asked me. You don't have any idea how much I begged my dad and grandpa, do you? Oppa, without me... Eek!"

"Let's go."

He pulled her up by her wrist.

Strangely enough, she didn't offer much resistance.

And so, leaving the living room and entering the cold passageway...

"Oppa."

A weak voice came from his back. Sae-Jin turned around to see why.

Right at that moment, Yu Sae-Jung slapped away his hand holding her wrist with all her power.

And then, she wrapped her arms around his neck in order to...

"....*groans in difficulty*"

...She tried to kiss him.

Unfortunately for her... she was just too short.

His 185 cm and her 160 cm. The difference of 25 cm couldn't be overcome even with her standing on tiptoes.

"...D**n it."

It was supposed to be an unexpected counterattack. On the verge

of tears, she ended up planting her lips on his neck instead.

"You know, right...? That I like Oppa a lot. That's why... Can you like me back?"

She then confessed her ardent and sincere feelings for him.

"Even if Oppa doesn't feel the same way, it's okay. I, I can wait."

The emotions contained within those wet eyes were so desperately sad and pitiful.

It was Kim Sae-Jin's turn to act next.

Already, half of his reasoning had been thrown out the window. He powerfully held the back of Yu Sae-Jung's neck and began to seek out her lips with his own. However, this action wasn't about conveying the emotions of love at all. It was rough. Very rough. So much so, the words 'trying to appease his lust' described it perfectly.

"Eup... Heup..."

At Kim Sae-Jin's rough hands, hem of her dress got ripped up.

Yu Sae-Jung became fearful of his sudden transformation.

"Oppa, wait... Eu-eup!"

But he continued. His tongue roughly roamed within her mouth, and his hands stroked her body with equally rough force.

Before she knew it, a single tear formed on the corner of Yu Sae-Jung's eyes.

She was scared.

Of course, if she wanted to refuse him, then she could. Mana had this effect of removing the alcohol's influence from one's system. But still... what if Kim Sae-Jin hated her for pushing him away?

That made her scared.

"Ahhh."

Thanks to her tears, Kim Sae-Jin could somehow regain his reasoning.

He saw the torn pieces of her dress on the floor, and Yu Sae-Jung who was now practically half naked.

"...I.. I'm sorry."

He grabbed his head and turned away from her.

He found himself so d**n pathetic.

Even though he knew things might end up like this, he still let her into his home.

But, seeing himself still blaming the instincts of the g*****n Monsters... he felt so cheap and pathetic.

"...No, no, I'm just..." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Strangely, it was Yu Sae-Jung who was taken back.

She dazedly stared at his back as he stood there in torment, before slowly approaching him and hugged his broad back.

"I'm fine." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Sae-Jin showed no reaction.

"I just got surprised, that's all." (Yu Sae-Jung)

She held his waist even tighter.

"Then... I'll go home now. We'll just talk again tomorrow. Just Please remember what I said... Ah. It doesn't have to be tomorrow. Whenever you are ready."

Her arms around his waist slipped away.

"I really like Oppa. This kind of emotion, I've never felt anything like it before in my life."

She left behind the most important confession of all, and then left his house.

2 days later.

"There are two types of warriors out there – the orthodox type, and the instinctive type."

The current location was The Monster's training facility.

Kim Sae-Jin was receiving a personalised training from a Knight invited from the Raven Order.

"The orthodox types are as the word suggests – they faithfully follow the prescribed guidelines of their chosen martial art schools. There are many 'Sects' in this path, but currently, the highest rated one is the Sect founded by the Raven Order Master Kim Hyun-Seok, 'Hyunseo' Sect which is based on his Trait."

A serious sparring with a strong Knight caused an unbelievable increase in the various Skills' Proficiency percentage, so he was holding this session precisely in order to increase his Human Form's capabilities and overall Skill Levels.

"And the famous Knights who follow this Sect's teachings are Miss Kim Yu-Rin, the Highest Tier Knight from our Order, and myself, the High Tier Knight Jin Yi-Hahn."

The Knight who introduced himself as Jin Yi-Hahn spoke proudly.

"And the so-called instinctive types are the ones that fully rely on their instincts and senses. The famous example of this type is the Order Master of the Dawn, Mister Yu Soo-Hyuk. From what I hear from Miss Yi Hye-Rin, you also seem to fall into this category as well, Mister Chairman."

Sae-Jin nodded his head. Even though Passive Skills played a role, the basis of the battle style he had adopted was him simply swinging his weapons based on his instincts and his senses.

"Well, then. Let's start with a simple test of your abilities."

Jin Yi-Hahn's expression turned into admiration as he traced the

surface of the practice blade with his fingertips. Even though it was simply for practising, this weapon was already on the level of a High Quality item.

"...Is it possible for me to take one of these practice weapons home with me?" (Jin Yi-Hahn)

"Hm? Ah, yes. Do as you wish."

"Thank you."

Jin Yi-Hahn quickly bowed his head.

"Well, then. Please attack with everything you have."

*

The clashings of practice swords had become somewhat intense, but its end was quite simple in nature.

SFX for strong gust of wind

Jin Yi-Hahn's last sword attack left behind razor-sharp tempest winds as it sliced Sae-Jin's own weapon in half. And upon receiving the impact, Sae-Jin ended up rolling over backwards on the floor. It was a clear demonstration of a gap in their power. As expected, a High Tier Knight was something else entirely.

"You are quite amazing." (Kim Sae-Jin)

"No, no. That's what I'd like to say about you."

Jin Yi-Hahn approached Sae-Jin and offered his hand. Even though he was defeated here, Sae-Jin still felt deeply satisfied as he grabbed the offered hand and stood up.

[Warrior's Special Quality – Proficiency Level: 98.99%]

From this sparring session alone, the Proficiency had risen as much as 3% in one go, that was why.

"Although you can't use Mana, with this level of abilities, I believe you can defeat a Mid Tier Knight quite easily."

"Do you really think so?"

"Yes."

Jin Yi-Hahn smiled.

'Then, that's a relief.'

With that little left, he'd be able to upgrade 'Warrior's Special Quality' to another level before the advent of the Red Moon. He had no clue just what kind of effect would be added, but well, surely it should prove useful to him regardless.

"Ah. Miss Yu Sae-Jung is waiting for you over there."

Jin Yi-Hahn pointed towards the entrance of the training facility and spoke.

And the brightly smiling Yu Sae-Jung was there, busy waving her hand over here.

*

Two days later.

From the early morning hours, urgent messages poured out from the TV news.

- The signs of the Red Moon have been detected and it's expected that in three days....

It was to deliver the news of the omen of the Red Moon's impending manifestation being detected.

The Red Moon.

As the term suggested, the moon itself became dyed in blood red. This event that the modern science could not find the cause of, was a calamity that befell on this planet every five to six years.

The moonlight, dyed in blood red colour for unknown reasons, amplified the Monsters' aggressiveness and powers much higher compared to normal.

And that was why a week before the Red Moon begins, a state of emergency would be declared all around the world; every Knight, Hunter and Wizard would come under the respective government's command and prepare themselves to battle this event.

But especially for someone like Kim Sae-Jin, it was the same as the Red Moon exceeding far past the level of a mere calamity and straight into apocalypse.

Actually, the person who reported the advent of Red Moon was Kim Sae-Jin.

- The legendary Mercenary, the Lycan, is the first person to discover the signs; he reported to the Ministry of Defense after allegedly sensing very faint changes within the clear sunlight. The citizens are praising the Lycan for detecting this global calamity beforehand....

With a spooky timing, the news anchor was mentioning the story of the Red Moon as well. He momentarily got confused, thinking that he was looking at an alert window that said, [The fame of the Lycan has risen.]

Whatever the case may have been, the only reason why Sae-Jin could become the first person in the world to detect the Red Moon was....

[Warning: The Eyes of the Wolf has detected the signs of the Red Moon!! Under the influence of the Red Moon, the time limit for the Human Form will decrease to only 10% of the usual time.]

It was thanks to this alert window.

The meaning behind those words, his Human time being reduced to only 10% of the usual available time – he could only exist as a human for around 45 minutes per day. It was too much of a risk to stay in the human society like that.

And so, Sae-Jin made a decision.

It'd be better to simply live and grow stronger inside the Monster field of Gangwon Province and at the same time, he might as well investigate the hidden base of Vampires near the Geumgang Mountain. That was his decision.

"Water, canned food, potions, a tent..."

He shoved all the items he would need for his survival during this season of the Red Moon inside the Expanding Pocket.

He had already left Jo Hahn-Sung in charge, temporarily at least, of the administration of the Society. And as for Yu Sae-Jung – as their relationship had become complicated thanks to that day's kissing... he somehow was able to succeed in persuading her.

"It's done. Eu-ssaya!!"

Sae-Jin lifted up the Expanding Pocket that was packed with 300 kg worth of stuff, and left his home.

< 22. Preparation (3) > Fin.

Chapter 75: Red Moon (1)

Standing right before the Monster field, Sae-Jin pulled out his mobile phone for the final time for the day.

Before he knew it, there were over 100 phone numbers saved in his lists of contacts. He first called Jo Hahn-Sung, then Soh Yeo-Jin, Joo Ji-Hyuk, Yi Hye-Rin, Kim Yu-Sohn in that order to say hello and then...

"Hello?"

- "...What do you want now?"

...He called Yu Baek-Song next. Maybe because she was hassled by Sae-Jin's frequent calls, there was a definite trace of a groan hidden in her voice.

"No, well. I just want to find out if you're well today."

- "...Yeah, I'm fine...."

...If it wasn't for you.

Sae-Jin thought he heard her whisper quietly in the background there, but decided to ignore that for now.

"But hey, aren't you being just a bit unfair? Haven't your accomplishments been very good because of us? Like, predicting the Red Moon and all that."

Around a week ago, Sae-Jin sent the word into the SID that the Lycan had detected the signs of the Red Moon. And so, the SID performed an in-depth investigation and with the proper proof uncovered, contacted the relevant government entities.

In other words, although the first one to detect the signs was the Lycan, it was the SID who had unearthed the actual evidence. From what Sae-Jin heard, the government acknowledged the efforts of the SID, which in turn restored the lost trust in the organization and on top of that, they were even given

performance-based bonuses as well.

So, wasn't her attitude just a bit too cold?

- "No way. You're not being a bother. On the contrary, I'm glad to talk to you."

Only then, Yu Baek-Song's voice forcibly became a bit lighter.

- "But what do you want now? Why did you call me? I told you last time that the investigation of your parents' matters is being done discreetly in order to avoid detection, didn't I?"

"It's not about that this time... What is your thoughts regarding the information we handed over to you before?"

He handed over the information about Vampires hiding in the Geumgang Mountain only to Yu Baek-Song. At the time, she promised to make a decision on it soon, but even after two weeks later, she was still keeping the result of her decision to herself only.

- "That thing... I'll let you know later. My head's gonna split in half just trying to figure it out alone."

"Really?"

- "Yeah. Sorry."

"...Well, I understand. But both Lycan and I are planning to look into this matter by ourselves later on. If the results seem certain, will you cooperate with us then?"

Yu Baek-Song didn't reply immediately and hesitated for a bit.

"Your answer?"

When Sae-Jin egged her on, Yu Baek-Song's powerless voice came out of the receiver. Her answer was out of his expectations.

- ".....Hey, by the way, like, what if I get fired? I mean, I'm already being suspected of doing something funny by myself already..."

"...Pardon?"

- "No, well. When giving me this information, you told me to keep it to myself only. Did you know by doing that, I'm breaking the law? I've sworn to submit any new information regarding the affairs of this country to my superior officer, the President, you see."

Her voice was trembling.

- "I said this to you before, right? There are people in higher positions than me. That information you gave me, if it's true then it will be classified as 'above top secret'. That means, without the permission of the President, I am not even allowed to have a say in it."

"Will you be fired if you move without permission?"

- "Obviously!!"

Yu Baek-Song shouted out. Kim Sae-Jin remained slightly dumbfounded for a moment, before chuckling out gently.

"I understand. If that's the case, then don't try to stand out too much. But if something happens and Miss Yu Baek-Song loses her job, then I'll hire you, as the new leader of The Monster Mercenary Company. And I'll pay you ten times the current annual salary."

- "...Huh?!"

"So, don't worry too much. Your reputation might suffer just a tad, but I promise to restore it to what it was once before by whatever means necessary."

Even after Sae-Jin finished with his words, Yu Baek-Song remained silent for a long time. And this silence continued on for another five minutes or so.

And finally...

- "...Don't need it. So, that's that. I'll call you when I find new info regarding your mother."

With that, she hung up.

Afterwards, Sae-Jin called up Yu Sae-Jung and Kim Yu-Rin for the last time and then infiltrated into the interior of the Monster field.

*

Originally, Sae-Jin planned to stay in whatever cave he could find in the Monster field, but as he walked around, he suddenly got curious – curious about just how much progress the Orc pair of male and female he took under his wings around two months ago had made.

Since he heard the news of those two 'Hero' Orcs helping out the Knights in a battle against Monsters three days ago, he knew for sure they weren't dead yet.

If that was the case, then it made more sense to stay in that village for the next ten days or so. Even if it was living amongst the Monsters, there was a good chance his life would be more convenient as there would be creatures willing to serve him in that place.

With that line of thought, he began wandering in the Monster field for 30 minutes.

Fortunately, Sae-Jin didn't get lost and could find the steep cliff just over yonder.

He changed the direction of his feet towards where the strong smell of the Orcs was coming from.

"Wah?"

It was probably because he was currently in his Orc Great Warrior Form, but as he approached the village, the firmly-shut mud gates were slowly opening up.

And from the opening of the gates, he could hear a noisy commotion. At first, it sounded like cries of beasts, and then, also

sounded like that of people welcoming him.

He slowly walked past the mud gates.

"Gua-gua!!"

The male Orc greeted him first. The changes in its physique was easy to spot – its hair was longer now, and its muscles were even more tougher as well.

Sae-Jin patted the head of the Orc which was only about a single handspan shorter than he was, and took a long look at the surroundings.

There were 21 offsprings of the two Orcs here. Now normally, an Orc needed around four months in order to reach full maturity so these ones were still of smaller stature but mysteriously, they all possessed blue skins.

That was because when Sae-Jin was tattooing the Orcs, he also added another effect – 'genetic inheritance'. When he spent so much effort to strengthen the parents, it'd be no good whatsoever if the offsprings were weak and thus lack the potential to grow stronger in the future.

"...Very good."

Nodding in satisfaction, he then moved his feet to build himself a place to dwell.

And behind his broad, dependable back, a couple dozen Orcs followed.

"They said that the Red Moon will rise tomorrow."

Hearing the report of the subordinate Knight, Kim Yu-Rin looked up at the night sky with determined eyes. The full moon's colour was still white and the sky was painted in dark navy blue.

However, when that moon becomes dyed in the colours of blood, then the whole world would also be bathed in red. "Understood. And the government's plan is?"

"They have set up the 1st line of defense within the interior of the Monster field, miss."

"Within the interior?"

Kim Yu-Rin's brows narrowed as she tried to figure out the reason. Obviously, by setting up the defensive line within the Monster field, there was the advantage of reducing the amount of area they need to, well, defend.

However, if a part of that line became compromised, the risk was equally high that a situation would occur where the defense force became surrounded by the Monsters flooding past the breach.

"Yes, ma'am. However, the position isn't too deep within the field, so it looks like you don't have to be concerned."

"Give me the map."

"Here it is."

She carefully studied the map in front of her.

But she found a strange place on it. On a certain corner of the defensive line, around a cliff formed by the upheaval of the earth not too long ago, there she saw big red letters 'area of interest' written over this mysterious location.

"...What is that all about?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Oh. That is the village of the Hero Orc. The location was discovered about a month ago, but as we can't predict what kind of actions these Orcs would take under the effect of the Red Moon, that location has been classified as an area to keep an eye out for."

"We can't predict that?"

"Yes, ma'am. The tactical plan will change accordingly to whether those Orcs fight with us even under the crimson moonlight, or lose their reasoning and revert back to being pure Monsters."

Kim Yu-Rin fell into a deep thought, her fingers tracing the scabbard of her sword.

What a contradictory thing to say, a Monster losing its reasoning. After all, a Monster didn't even have the capacity to reason, to begin with.

But the Monster that shattered this notion did appear not too long ago.

A new type of Orc, the so-called 'Hero Orc'. This somewhat embarrassing nickname wasn't given to it just by the public – the scientific name printed on the Monster Bestiary used around the world was 'Hero Orc' as well.

Seen as a new, separate genus of the Orc family, people started calling these Orcs with the moniker 'Hero' ever since they roared out loudly and rushed in to help out the Knights in danger. Also, as these branch of Orcs was first discovered in the Republic of Korea, sometimes they were referred to as the Korean Orcs as well.

"Are the higher-ups thinking of utilising these Orcs as another defensive wall if they start helping humans out just like before?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Yes, ma'am. It seems that way."

"...Hmm."

She wasn't 100% certain about this, but if things indeed happen like that, then those Orcs would be wonderful allies to have.

Kim Yu-Rin recalled the battle prowess of the Orc Great Warrior who fought the Basilisk alongside her in the past, then nodded her head.

"We'll enter the Monster field with our company of Knights. Has the frontlines been constructed yet, via cutting down and burning away the forest?"

"Yes, ma'am. Not only the physical barricades, Wizards prepared

safe living areas by preparing magical barriers and watchtowers." "Good."

*

While Kim Yu-Rin and countless other Knights were tightening up their defenses in preparation for the Red Moon.

[The Skill 'Warrior's Special Quality' has risen up a level.]

[A new property, 'Mana-friendly Body', has been acquired.]

Through constant hunting, Sae-Jin finally unlocked the next stage of the 'Warrior's Special Quality' skill.

But that wasn't all.

[The new property 'Mana-friendly Body' is reacting to the Form-specific Skill 'Ruler of the Water' of the Feeble Sea Monster Form!]

[The property has been upgraded to 'Mana Body'.] (TL: Yes, it's really called Mana Body. The author used different Hanja words for this skill and for the Mana-friendly Body, but they literally mean the same thing...)

['Mana Body'] [Skill Proficiency 0.01%]

- A body that is extremely friendly towards Mana.
- Depending on the current Proficiency Level, there is a probability of negating the effects of Mana and/or magic spells of another that comes in contact with the host's body.
- Depending on the current Proficiency Level, the host can manipulate the Mana stored in the body according to the wishes of the host. Can be activated concurrently with other Skills.
- When the Proficiency Level reaches 100%, a new property will be unlocked.

"Hmm..."

Sae-Jin sat down on the dead body of the Ogre he just killed, and began checking out this new Mana Body thingy.

'I can manipulate Mana as I want to.'

It sure was one of the most welcoming alert windows he'd yet seen. After all, he had never received tutelage on how to use Mana and also, he didn't know how to make Mana move in his body, even.

"...Hmm."

However, he wasn't quite sure of what to do now.

For now, he stretched his arm out and clenched his fist tightly. But well, he didn't see any strange reaction, nor did he feel anything weird either.

"Hmm?"

This time, he focused his eyes on one point. He did that until his eyeballs became bloodshot, but again, nothing much happened.

"Hmm..."

Kim Sae-Jin sat there imitating a parrot for a while, but then figured out how to use it from an unexpected viewpoint. (TL: I've no idea what the author is trying to say here with the parrot bit. It's the literal TL.)

'Since it said 'according to my wishes', does that mean Mana'll move if I think about it? But isn't that a bit different from what I heard before?'

'Mana through one's wishes' – that wasn't the fundamental law of Mana Utilisation the Knights and Wizards adhered to. They said that they moved the Mana flowing in their blood vessels 'physically' and then expel it out of their bodies. If Mana can be moved around with nothing but some simple thoughts, then why would the professions of Knights and Wizards be seen as highly specialised and valuable?

'If I just think of making Mana rise out of my arm, then...'

...And from his arm, thick Mana rose up.

"*Cries of fright, Orc style*"

Kim Sae-Jin got genuinely surprised and ended up tumbling over backwards.

"What the hell!!"

Sae-Jin quickly shot back to his feet and shouted at the Mana wavering around his arm.

Controlling Mana with nothing but his thoughts – he'd never even heard of such a nonsense before.

Gulp.

He swallowed his saliva down and sent in a thought towards this Mana.

Simple thoughts such as 'grow in width; grow in length; go lower', as well as...

'Turn into flames.'

Hwareureuk-

On the empty air where Mana was undulating, a sudden spark of fire began and started burning up.

'Turn into dirt.'

The flame burning up in the middle of the air then became brown soil and fell on the ground.

'Turn into snow.'

Pure white snowflakes began to fall slowly.

'Turn into a sword.'

[The Skill Proficiency must be over 50% in order to activate this skill concurrently with the Skill 'Orc's Smithing Technique'.]

It was not possible for now, but as soon as his Proficiency has increased...

"Wow..."

He could only admire this new property in daze.

As expected, there was a reason why this new thing was classified as 'property' instead of 'skill'.

< 23. Red Moon (1) > Fin.

Chapter 76: Red Moon (2)

The defensive perimeter of the Knights against the Red Moon had been completed, near the location where Sae-Jin was.

He found this out via the mobile phone he brought along from home.

'Wait a second here. Will these Orcs be alright?'

He became worried about the influence of the Red Moon, all of a sudden. He figured that depending on which one had a higher degree of influence – his Skills or the Red Moon – the Orcs would act accordingly. However, this Red Moon was a wide-scale calamity that caused Monsters to go completely wild. Could these Orcs possibly withstand such disaster?

"...Bring the remaining Orcs to me."

The powerful baritone voice of Kim Sae-Jin the Orc Great Warrior spread around like a wave.

And then, with the exception of four agile Orcs that were sent out to the Geumgang Mountain as scouts, the Orcs in the village all promptly gathered where he was.

"Ev'ryburdy iss heer, oh, Great War-ier."

"

The Orc in charge spoke. Sae-Jin's forehead creased just a little. He was kind of regretting giving this guy the Passive 'Vocal Cord Reconstruction' now. He only did it to make communication a bit easier, but seriously, the combination of the Orc's ugly face and that short-tongued pronunciation of words was creeping the hell out of him.

"Enter."

He assumed the Goblin Form and began inscribing Magic Tattoos on the Orcs, one at a time. The base ingredient used was his own blood; the effect imbued would be simple – 'resistance to magic', to endure the influence of the Red Moon.

The Goblin's Craftsmanship skill was now at B+, and it only took just over a minute to tattoo a single Orc. In total, 30 minutes would be enough to tattoo all the Orcs present.

After quickly finishing up the tattooing process, he shooed them out of his dwelling and resumed the training of 'Mana Body' in order to increase its Proficiency Level.

The usage of this Mana Body was truly endless, but unfortunately, it could only be used for 15 minutes tops, meaning it was not really all that practical to use in the real battle. On top of that, during the Human Form, that time became even shorter at 5 minutes. If he used it for any longer than that, he would go lightheaded and promptly pass out.

'Rise into the air.'

So, Sae-Jin was thinking of increasing the duration to 15 minutes while in the Human Form by leveling up the Proficiency.

However, there wasn't enough time to raise his Proficiency after all.

All of a sudden, a red light began descending down on the world.

*

A heavy fog of war circulated on the defensive perimeter constructed by the countless Knights and Wizards.

The military had already retreated far behind the frontlines since they would only become a burden had they stayed. The only people left here and waiting, were the Knights and Wizards; but even many of them were either deeply nervous or were scared of the upcoming great war.

This wasn't the first Red Moon to appear in the history – but this one would certainly be far more difficult to hold back compared to

in the past. During the previous Red Moons, the weak Monsters appeared first, then gradually, to stronger ones – but now, there was no distinction between the Monsters anymore. (TL: in case if you're wondering why... remember the great land upheaval that pretty much made the Monster field unsafe? Yeah, that's why.)

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that they might end up having to fight high Tiered Monsters such as Basilisks, Manticores, or even Wyverns on the first day.

Kim Yu-Rin could definitely sympathise with their worries and fears. After all, even her own heart was beating in an unsettled manner for a while now.

"How are you feeling?"

Even still, she tried to calm the person next to her – Yu Sae-Jung, who was just as tense as the other Knights.

"Eh? Ah, yes, I'm okay."

From the back of Yu Sae-Jung's neck, exposed by her hair tied upwards, a faint outline of a pretty tattoo could be seen. Kim Yu-Rin thought that was probably the famous Magic Tattoo of Kim Sae-Jin.

Some people criticised Sae-Jin for only tattooing the members of his Society, but what could they do about it? He could do as he liked, after all.

"The Society Chairman did it for me, while saying, 'don't die out there'."

Realising that Kim Yu-Rin was looking at the tattoos, Yu Sae-Jung's face reddened slightly, maybe out of pride or from shyness.

Kim Yu-Rin was somewhat envious of such feelings of young love.

"So that's how it is. Then, you should make sure not to die, right?"

"Yep. Of course."

As the two of them smiled at each other...

Out of the blue, there was a commotion by the defensive perimeter.

They quickly looked up at the sky.

A bloody colour was spreading on the previously snow white full moon like a spilled ink.

"It has begun."

When Yu Sae-Jung murmured, Kim Yu-Rin somberly nodded her head.

- Kiiiieeeeeck!!!

It only took an instant for the darkness blocking their view to change to crimson colour.

The Monsters' maddened screams filled the mountainside. The roars of the Monsters rumbled around and around, until reaching up high into the sky and touching the Red Moon, causing the morale of the gathered defenders to plummet further.

SFX for loud thumping noises

Incredible tremor akin to earthquake rushed towards them.

"Get ready for combat!!"

Out from the communication crystal, a resolute shout of a man came out. It was the voice of Kim Hyun-Seok, Yu-Rin's father. She unsheathed her sword at the incoming order.

And from a distance away, a Monster revealed its huge, wriggling body.

Its eyes blood-red, its jaw lined with teeth that were shaped like pincers and the numerous legs rubbing on the ground below, the 'Giant Centipede' approached the location of the defenders.

From the get-go, a difficult High Tier Monster had appeared. Its

massive bulk and the grotesque appearance were enough to scare the living daylights out of some junior Knights here.

Kim Yu-Rin took a glance to her side. Clearly scared, Yu Sae-Jung's hands gripping the sword was trembling.

"Do not fear."

Yu-Rin gently held the girl's hand.

"...Yes."

Yu Sae-Jung looked at her and nodded.

*

Basilisks, Giant Centipedes, Wyverns, Griffins, Flesh Golems, etc...

High ranked Monsters, many of them incredibly rare and hard to encounter even once in one's lifetime, poured in like tsunami waves.

And as the opponents of the week-long Red Moon's first day the Knights had to face, these Monsters were simply too vicious and frightening.

Knights who ran away were quite a few in number. It was par for the course, really – as they were lower ranked and just too young to have experienced such absurd situations before.

SFX of someone sobbing

There were also many Knights breaking down in tears after losing their limbs.

Clearly, the defenders were in a numerical disadvantage in this battle.

But regardless, Kim Yu-Rin swung her sword.

The blue sword aura became the storm winds of Mana and swept away countless Monsters. And from the gap between the walls of Monsters she just created, Yu-Rin spotted a Lich casting magic spells far away.

From the beginning, the very first target Knights aimed to kill was the enemy spellcaster. As soon as she spotted the Monster, she held the sword in reverse grip and stabbed the earth with it.

It was the attack containing her Trait, 'Desideratum'.

In that moment, a huge Mana blade formed in the air just above where the Lich was standing and sank into the surface of the ground. The Lich, now its body divided in half, became dust particles when the belated secondary explosion took place.

And so, she repeatedly fought her desperate battles, over and over again.

However, the overall status of the battle was still not good; the defensive line was about to collapse. It was a desperately bad situation. No matter what, the frontline must never be breached.

She now saw the subordinate Knights battling an Ogre over yonder, one of the sword aura slicing the Monster's wrist. Among them was Yu Sae-Jung, whom reminded Yu-Rin of her younger days for some reason.

Kim Yu-Rin summoned her strength once more and grasped her sword tightly.

Right then – from somewhere, a violent tremor spread out on the ground. And shortly afterwards, the powerful roar shattered the sky above.

That was definitely not from a human, for sure.

SFX for thunderous footsteps

The footsteps began to close in.

In despair, the Knights looked on towards the direction of the sound.

And there was a group of Orcs.

It wasn't a big number.

But the appearance of the leading Orc was so overwhelmingly imposing, as if to imply it could do the job of a thousand men.

And so, the Orc Great Warrior that had suddenly entered the battlefield, with its lengthy hair whipping against the wind, rushed forward like a shooting star – or maybe even a wild beast – and swung its mace in the air.

Kwaaaaahhang!!

The terrifying shock wave undulated like a stormy wave and swept across the battlefield.

Judging by their red eyes, the Hero Orc's group was definitely under the influence of the Red Moon.

However... their enemies were not humans, but Monsters.

Whenever the Orc Great Warrior swung his mace, the sounds of destruction akin to the Big Bang explosion shook the world and Monster's body parts were turned to mush. From the contact points of the mace, flames sometimes flared up, and other times a bitter coldness harsh enough to freeze the land rushed out.

Kwang-! Kwang-! Kwang-!

And the reason for such changes in the elements were, without a doubt, Mana surrounding the mace.

The Orc Great Warrior displayed overwhelming martial prowess as it ran amok. His mace did not differentiate what Monster it was. Other Orcs, Ogres, Gnolls, Spartois, etc., etc. – as soon as they came in contact with the destructive swing of the weapon, all were ripped apart like the blowing dust.

The perfect physique of the Orc Great Warrior withstood almost all the physical attacks. Even if it was surrounded by hundreds of Monsters, he received not one wound. And so, this creature didn't even bother to defend against enemy's attacks or try to avoid them, instead choosing to concentrate on utter destruction only.

Blowing away the stomach of an Ogre blocking his forward march, then freezing the headless knight Dullahan on the spot – the Orc even fired his own powerful sword aura towards an airborne Wyvern to bring it down.

The deeply-impressionable sight of the Great Warrior battling hundreds, thousands of enemies all alone – the God of War had descended on earth.

The Knights of this battlefield dazedly witnessed this display of martial might that was vicious but at the same time, also utterly mesmerising.

SFX for a loud roar of the Orc

The Orc Great Warrior roared out wildly, covered from head to toe in blood.

In any other times, such a roar would induce fear, but right now, people found it quite reassuring instead. It was loud enough to instill the belief that the flow of this battle could be reversed, back into the hearts of many. Some Knights also ended up roaring out as they renewed their unceasing attacks on the Monsters.

Among them was Kim Yu-Rin and Yu Sae-Jung as well.

And so, the 2nd round began.

The moon finally hid below the horizon and the sunlight began to brighten the world.

The Red Moon had ended, at least for today. There were many casualties. Not just those Knights who had passed out from losing their body parts, but also those who had actually lost their lives.

" •••

However, the Knights gathered here could not express their

sorrow that easily. They just couldn't, after seeing the sad and lonesome expression of the Orc Great Warrior which was surveying the corpse of one of its own.

The brave Hero Orcs that came to help them even under the influence of the Red Moon – the initial group of 30 had now dwindled down to less than half of its original number. It was difficult to fathom the depths of sadness of the leader of these Hero Orcs, its Chieftain, as their numbers were low to begin with.

"...Soo-Gyeom," (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin called out to her subordinate Knight, Kim Soo-Gyeom after gazing at the Orc with equally sad eyes.

"Yes?"

"Here. Hold onto this for a bit."

She handed over her treasured sword to him and slowly approached the Hero Orc.

SFX for light footsteps

Stepping over the dried blood on the ground, she stepped in front of the Orc 'Chieftain'.

"....Hey." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Yu-Rin carefully reached out and touched the Orc's shoulder. The Orc felt this very faint sense of being touched and when he turned his head to look...

"&@#%*!!!"

...He took several steps back in shock. He got so surprised, he nearly ended up tumbling over backwards, even.

"Eh..."

At his reaction, Yu-Rin's expression became somewhat wounded.

"...What does she want now?" (Kim Sae-Jin)

Kim Sae-Jin's flustered state didn't want to calm down so easily.

"Do you, maybe, remember... me?"
"..."

Even still, Yu-Rin tried to chat to him. Wondering if this woman developed a habit of trying to talk to Monsters, Sae-Jin continued to stare at her with genuinely confused mind.

"Ma'am, what are you doing?"

From afar back, scared shouts of Knights could be heard.

Although they did fight together until now, this Orc just lost over half of its brethren. No one knew what might happen if it got peeved off at something she might end up doing...

... "

Thankfully, the fears of those Knights were assuaged in the next instance with a nod from the Orc Great Warrior.

"Ah. That is... wonderful news. What a relief... sir."

Without realising it, Yu-Rin began speaking politely. It felt like to her that the Orc could understand her words.

"I... am sorry for your loss."

Kim Yu-Rin pointed at the corpse of the Orc sprawled on the ground and spoke. However, the Orc Great Warrior simply stared at her for a long time, not showing any reaction whatsoever.

But, all of a sudden...

The Great Warrior raised its hand high.

"Ma'am!!"

Even a single fist strike could cause a fatal injury to Kim Yu-Rin. The Knights rushed forward in fear.

"...Huh?"

But right next moment, all of them had to stop abruptly.

The raised hand of the Orc Great Warrior lightly descended on

top of Yu-Rin's head, and he proceeded to pat her hair gently.

"Keum."

After letting out a single fake cough out of embarrassment, the Great Warrior then turned around and left the battlefield. The surviving Orcs started following him.

"....Mmm...."

Yu-Rin chased after the back of the Great Warrior with her eyes. Strangely enough, there was a healthy red glow on both of her cheeks.

< 23. Red Moon (2) > Fin.

Chapter 77: Red Moon (3)

The area where the chaos of the Red Moon had swept across was now filled with forlorn silence and stillness.

Under the dim glow of the early morning sunlight, the wounded Knights were carried off to the temporary infirmary set up towards the rear, and several Knights, fatigued from the endless combat and lacking even the energy to get to the rest area, decided to just plop down on the ground and take break right there.

However, even among this scene of near-silent breaths and intermittent groans of pain, there were a few Knights present whose first priority wasn't about resting up, but to tease a certain person nonstop.

"...I've already told you many times, it's not like that." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Thanks to that, the person who was probably the most tired of them all, Kim Yu-Rin, couldn't even take a proper break and instead had to make excuses one after another.

As one could imagine, the problem was with her face going red after the Hero Orc patted her head. The sight of her crimson cheeks and the past her declaring 'the Goblin is her ideal person' overlapped into one and that resulted in her being seen as a pervert with a weird fetish.

"But it's a bit, you know, to say you're not... I have never seen our Team Captain make a face like that before... It's okay, Miss Yu-Rin, you can talk to me. You know I am good at keeping secrets." (Yi Hye-Rin)

Among them, even though one of her arms were heavily wounded, Yi Hye-Rin didn't forget to be cheerful and teased Yu-Rin more than anyone else. It was most likely because, without this kind of distraction, it'd be too difficult for Hye-Rin to endure

the horrors of what happened here only a few hours ago.

"No, I'm telling you, honestly it's not like that!! It's just that..."

...I was panicking a little because of the manly scent coming from the Orc, that's all.

As her chain of thought reached up to here, all of a sudden, a spark was ignited in her head.

The Orc's scent was similar to another one she smelled somewhere else. Although the smell of blood and iron got in the way of detecting it properly, as her senses were sharply tuned, she could pick up on the unexplainable but definite similarity between the Orc's and that other scent.

"...Just that, and...? Oh, no~ what should we do now~? What's gone wrong with our Team Captain's preference in men~?"

"H, hey, I said, it's not like that!!!"

"Ah-aht!! That's why Miss Yu-Rin was not dating anyo... Eueuph!!"

Kim Yu-Rin hurriedly dashed out and covered Hye-Rin's mouth.

And so, as she began wasting what little energy she had left on something quite useless, the questions of regarding that scent's origins got naturally faded into the background.

*

Returning to the village with the surviving dozen or so Orcs, Sae-Jin laid down to take a good rest. But he only needed four hours of sleep. The body of the Great Warrior didn't want a break any longer than that.

And so, after waking up when the sun was exactly right in the middle of the sky, he searched for his mobile phone.

"Oh. So, there hasn't been anything strange with Muffin so far, yes?"

- "Yes, sir. With no red moonlight touching her, she didn't behave erratically or anything like that." (Jo Hahn-Sung)

The Red Moon caused frenzied and mindless state only by coming into contact with the Monsters in the first place. So, rather fortunately, Muffin wasn't affected by it as she was hidden deep underground.

"Alright. Then please continue taking care of the Society's matters in the future as well. And if something big happens, resolve it in the way you see fit. Oh, and if you're planning to hire more people, please don't forget that I need to see them at least once."

- "I understand, Mister Chairman."

Jo Hahn-Sung enthusiastically replied. Sae-Jin still had one more thing left to say, though.

"Have you really understood what I said? I said, 'in the future'. The future, Mister Hahn-Sung."

- "...I beg your pardon?"

"What I'm saying is, not just for this week only, but from now on, you take the reins of managing the Society in the future."

This was something Sae-Jin had been thinking about lately. As the Society grew, it would become more specialised and integrated – but, well, having a final decision maker who was rather ignorant of the world's business, as well as suffering from chronic shortage of time, now wouldn't that be a fatal disadvantage going forward?

That was why it might be better to delegate his role to someone else altogether. No, it should be better. After all, he was already doing nothing much other than giving his approvals, anyway.

- "Mister Chairman, are you perhaps going off to somewhere far?"

"No, it's not like that, just that, it's all bothersome, you see?

Besides, Mister Hahn-Sung is twice smarter than I am, anyways. Ah, right. This doesn't mean I'm completely relinquishing my position at all. Mister Jo Hahn-Sung as the acting CEO, and I'm the majority shareholder – something like that type of arrangement."

- "That, that is..."

"It's alright. I know. It's too big a topic to talk over the phone, so let's meet up later on and hash it out. I'm hanging up now. I'm running short on time, you see."

- "Ye, yes, sir."

Even though he was still trying to recover his senses from the sudden, super-fast promotion, Jo Hahn-Sung somehow managed to reply back.

Sae-Jin chuckled slightly and ended the call.

The time to train was here. He changed back to the Orc Great Warrior Form.

*

The following evening.

Before the horrifying memories of the previous night, when Monsters ranked higher than upper Mid Tier such as Ogres flooded in like invading ants, had the chance to fade away, the second Red Moon appeared. But unlike the initial fears, this time the defenders faced waves of much weaker Monsters.

Perhaps, that first night must have been just an anomaly. The same thing happened the day after, and then on the day after that as well.

The presence of outstanding Knights and Wizards, as well as the now-familiar dependable ally Hero Orc, who could easily substitute for a thousand men, made enduring the Red Moon somewhat easier.

Of course, during the week-long duration of the Red Moon, not

all waves of Monsters would be this simple to contain, but still, the participating Knights were able to store up their strength this way.

"What's the matter? You should just ask him out on a date~." (Yi Hye-Rin)

And now, after the fifth night of the battle had ended. As Kim Yu-Rin continued to stare blankly at the back of the Hero Orc, Yi Hye-Rin began to tease her once more.

"Fuu-hut."

Even Yu Sae-Jung started giggling on the side as she wiped the dried blood off her sword. But then, Yu-Rin's sharp glares landed on her, and all Sae-Jung could do at that moment was to hurriedly stare down at the ground.

"Be mindful of where you are. Right now, Knight Yi Hye-Rin and I are not of the same rank. Do I look like a friend to you?!"

"...My apologies, ma'am." (Yu Sae-Jung)

It seemed that humouring them until now had become a problem.

When Kim Yu-Rin hardened her face and shouted out aloud, only then Yi Hye-Rin stopped with her teasing.

"I thought that, because the Team Captain's eyes looked so dreamy..."

"T, this idiot is?!"

...Looked like she was stopping, but...

"I mean, really now. Past four days, after battles are over you've been bringing water to him~. And when he's about to leave, you see him out, too~~. It's so like watching a shy maiden's actions with a guy she fell in love at first sight or something. At first I was teasing you, but now... I'm genuinely worried about you, Captain. Please pull yourself together."

Yi Hye-Rin fired off words like machinegun rounds.

And at her words, Kim Yu-Rin made a slightly panicking face. She was only trying to figure out that smell of the Orc, but now that she thought about it, her actions did look strange enough to rouse misunderstandings.

- "...Inter-species mating is not allowed, you know? Morally, legally, and even scientifically, it's definitely not allowed."
- "E... Eeeek!! It's not like that!! I told you over and over again, it's not what you think!!"

When Yi Hye-Rin spoke with 100% pure worry in her voice, Kim Yu-Rin shouted back with her face totally red.

*

Already a week had passed since the beginning of the Red Moon that made the public worry deeply. For Korea though, the damage it received was far lower compared to other countries.

While the 1st world nations such as the USA and the Western Europe faced unprecedented loss of life and destruction of property due the Red Moon, in Korea, the defenders fought so well that the 1st defensive line hadn't even been breached yet. It was all thanks to the Hero Orc and the brave Knights, of course.

On top of that, an unknown Knight revealed the part of a footage to the world, filmed in the middle of the defense against the Red Moon, which featured the Hero Orc's role in the battle. The Orc's absolutely overwhelming martial prowess was captured in it.

The video spread out to the rest of the world in an instant, and not just within the country, but even the other countries boiled over with the stories regarding the Hero Orc.

Within the span of the Red Moon week, the fame of the Hero Orc had risen up so high that practically, everyone knew who it was. Hell, some overseas nations enquired the Korean government about loaning the Hero Orcs out to them, saying that they'd like to take a male and female pair and have them live in their nations'

own respective Monster fields...

And so, the Red Moon continued to remain as a source of many talking points as well as great sorrow but finally, on the 8th day of the Red Moon, a very good news spread among the defenders.

"It's going to end the day after tomorrow!!"

The current location was the 1st defensive perimeter that had become a total wasteland. After receiving a phone call, Joo Ji-Hyuk shouted out in a happy expression. And that caused many wounded and suffering Knights to abruptly open their eyes wide.

"...Huh? Really?! Who said that?"

Yi Hye-Rin was the first to run over and ask. And before anyone knew it, even Kim Yu-Rin and Yu Sae-Jung were standing behind Joo Ji-Hyuk now. But other Knights couldn't muster up the courage to intrude on the so-called 'Monster Family', so they could only eavesdrop from a distance.

"It's from the Chairman. He said that Lycan had informed him."

The smile on Ji-Hyuk's face showed no signs of disappearing.

"Wah. Then that's for real~ Ahssaya~!" (Yi Hye-Rin)

Yi Hye-Rin stretched her arms grandly.

Nowadays, the Lycan's words were accepted as truth, almost on the level of worship, even. There was the contribution of catching Vampires, but more importantly, he was the very first person in the history to detect signs of the approaching Red Moon a week in advance.

"...Wait a sec. Did you say Oppa had called?"

But for some reason, Yu Sae-Jung glared at Joo Ji-Hyuk with stiff face as if something was unsatisfactory.

"Eh? Oh, ah... Yes." (Joo Ji-Hyuk)

"But why didn't he call me?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

She began complaining and pulled out her mobile phone. Of course, there was no call from Kim Sae-Jin.

"Oh, he said he'd call you soon."(Joo Ji-Hyuk)

"...He did?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

SFX for phone ringing

The mobile phone began ringing at the same time. Yu Sae-Jung's face remained weird as she tried hard to not to show that she was expecting this call while she checked out the LCD screen. And right away, a bright smile bloomed on her lips.

"May I be excused for a while, please~."

Yu Sae-Jung went towards a quiet area with no people – place where she could talk unhindered – with steps light and soft enough to make her float in the air.

And the two woman, Kim Yu-Rin and Yi Hye-Rin who not only didn't have a boyfriend but didn't even have someone they liked, chased after the back of Sae-Jung with envious eyes.

As the sky began to redden, the Knights began to grasp their weapons, and Wizards began channeling Mana in their bodies, all getting ready for another night of battle up ahead. The preparation before the battle was top notch. The morale was deeply boosted with the belief that if they survived tonight and the night after, this damned war would come to an end.

SFX for roars of Monsters

From somewhere, the cries of Monsters rang high into the sky.

In the distance, the legendary Monster Basilisk could be seen. And there was the single-eyed Ogre which was reputedly the most powerful of all Ogres, a 'Cyclops'.

All the Monsters appearing hadn't been seen until now. This was going to be a difficult fight without a doubt. Everyone began

tensing up. But none of them scattered.

The belief in themselves having grown both emotionally and physically gave them much confidence, and also, there was also the powerful ally helping them out which helped them relax just a little bit more.

"All troops, ready your arms!!"

Kim Yu-Rin loudly shouted out.

Mana coming out from the numerous Knights and Wizards present started humming in the air.

*

Kim Sae-Jin, the Orc Great Warrior, swung his mace and then swung some more in this chaotic battlefield. From the mace overflowing with Mana, shock waves and Mana-infused 'sword' auras burst out repeatedly, ripping Monsters to shreds. The ground brutally split apart, and fountains of blood sprayed into the air, making the red moonlight redder still.

The word overwhelming suited the Orc's fighting prowess, but the source of this display of irrepressible power was actually thanks to a certain wonderful cycle that started off by killing Monsters in the first place.

His Skill 'Predator' reinforced his strength the more Monsters he killed. And so, in this place overflowing with Monsters, whenever he smashed one apart, Sae-Jin was growing stronger. In other words, even if he couldn't kill a Monster today, after going through the day's rapid growth, he'd be able to kill it the following day.

It was the same for absorbing the Mana Stones as well. Normally, in order to absorb one, he'd have dig it out from the heart of the Monsters which would garner a few curious onlookers, but now that he had this 'Mana Body', the process had become a lot simpler. He'd just have to touch the dead Monster's body to send

in his Mana and assimilate the Mana Stone.

And so, he absorbed all the Mana Stones of the countless dead Monsters lining up on the ground like a glutton, even in the middle of this crazy melee.

One could say that for Kim Sae-Jin, this Red Moon was perhaps the greatest 'event' for crazy leveling up, making him stronger today than yesterday, and stronger still tomorrow compared to today.

SFX for an Orcish roar

But for now, he didn't have enough time to focus on his growth.

He had spotted Kim Yu-Rin in the distance, fighting hard against a Bladed Dokkaebi. Maybe it was because she'd been fighting nonstop for the past four hours, the Mana covering her sword was getting dimmer and dimmer by the second.

The Orc immediately kicked the ground and rushed towards her location. After arriving there while raising a tempest, he raised the mace up high. And then, slammed down with 'Fierce Strike', loaded with seriously ridiculous destructive power.

Kwaaaahaang!!

The Bladed Dokkaebi raised both of its arms to block the mace but it was simply not adequate enough. The two arms of this Monster, reputedly as strong as that of adamantium, shattered like glass.

SFX for a 'thing' going splat

After losing its arms, the Bladed Dokkaebi turned around in order to run away. Obviously, the Orc didn't allow that to happen and he powerfully smacked the back of the Monster's head with the mace.

With the dull sound of destruction, the Monster's head split open like a crushed tomato.

"Kheuk!"

Unfortunately, Kim Yu-Rin got caught up in the shock wave of the Orc's attack, and fell down on the ground.

"...Gheu-euh."

The Orc approached her and offered his hand. Kim Yu-Rin blankly stared at the creature for a moment, before grabbing it and pulling herself up.

"...Aht."

As soon as she was up, the Orc once more patted her on the head.

She felt like she had reverted back to being a little kid. But it didn't all feel bad. No, it rather felt pretty good, instead. Besides from her father when she was very young, Yu-Rin hadn't felt this sensation of being protected by a dependable man up until now...

"...Ha-ahp!!"

However, Kim Yu-Rin deliberately roughly slapped away the Orc's hand and let out a loud shout. Her face felt hot for some reason. It was like, she was beginning to think, how dare a lowly Orc look down on humans...

"Just die!"

She loaded Mana into her sword and swung it. The winds of Mana spread around like the waves of the rough sea.

But at that exact moment, the violent current of Mana suddenly shot up from the ground.

This was energy from a strange magic spell being activated.

"Everyone...!!"

Carrying a shocked expression, Kim Yu-Rin quickly turned her head towards her subordinate Knights.

And then – the ground she was standing on collapsed noisily.

< 23 Red Moon (3) > Fin.

Chapter 78: Red Moon (4)

The invading coldness and the water drops falling on her body woke Kim Yu-Rin up.

It was pitch dark everywhere. The steam of breath escaping her lips were white. It was really cold in here. So, she tried to wrap her body with the Mana Barrier. However, Mana in her body didn't respond.

Thanks to the puzzlement and the subsequent realisation of the severity of this situation woke her up from the dazed state real fast. At the same time...

"...Kheu-eu."

She heard a low growl out of the blue. Surprised, she quickly turned her head around and saw the Hero Orc. And her heart nearly jumped out of her mouth. He was so close that if she reached out, her hand would touch him.

She forcibly suppressed her wildly beating heart and tried to stand up. It seemed like she must've hit something while falling, as her knee joints ached. But figuring out where she was had higher priority than worrying about such pain for now.

So, she looked around.

For a cave she fell into after the ground gave in, this place sure looked... man-made. And for some strange reason, she could not control her Mana at all.

'Is this because of an isolation barrier?'

With a dead-serious face, Yu-Rin touched the dark wall of the cave. And when her skin came in contact with the wall, a strangely cold sensation crept up all over her body.

"SFX for a sound someone makes while shivering in cold"

She couldn't help but collapse back down while her body

trembled from the invading coldness.

And seeing her like this, Kim Sae-Jin let out a quiet sigh. Just what the heck was this bothersome situation, when he was getting sleepy from using up so much of his own Mana?

'But man, where is this place anyways?'

Only after he activated the Eyes of the Wolf could he check out the interior of the cave better, but still, the end could not be seen at all. There wasn't even a single beam of light in this perfect darkness.

Feeling frustrated and irritated, he began pressing down on his forehead.

"It's an isolation barrier magic," said Kim Yu-Rin. "Since there is a high probability that simple collapsing of the ground would not harm the Knights who can use Mana Barriers, it seems like there had been a specialised isolation enchantment placed here beforehand. But a Lich can not lay out such a multi-layered magic spell."

She turned her head to look at the Orc. She wasn't sure whether he could understand her words or not, but seeing that he was quietly gazing at her made her think that maybe, he could.

"That's because a Lich lacks any form of reasoning and so it only uses destructive spells. That's why this was the handiwork of humans for sure."

" "

The Orc wordlessly nodded his head.

'Man, this is so d**n frustrating.'

The mouth of Kim Sae-Jin the Orc was itching madly right now. The Proficiency for the Vocal Cord Reconstruction had increased so 'nicely' that now it was already at B, meaning it was not a problem to talk in this Orc Form. However, for an Orc to talk like a

human was... just a bit wrong, was it not? Of course, Kim Yu-Rin did meet a talking Goblin in the past, but still.

"In that case... should we start... walking now?"

Only half sure of the Orc understanding human speech, Kim Yu-Rin gestured with her hand. Then, the Orc really took the lead and began walking deeper into the cave.

"Huh."

She stood there with her mouth hanging loose while staring at the back of the Orc in a daze, before waking up from the stupor to hurriedly follow him.

*

No matter how long they walked, the exit could not be found. And Kim Yu-Rin's face became paler and paler as well, from the case of severe hypothermia.

Seeing her shake like a leaf next to him, Sae-Jin briefly fell into a dilemma. Currently, he had a coat-type armour inside his body via Spiritualisation. If he brought that out and handed it over to her, she wouldn't shake like that.

"...Ha, ah..."

He could hear her freezing breaths. In a way, that was expected. The coldness in this cave was harsh enough to make him, an Orc, feel the deathly chilliness as well. And within this bitter coldness, she couldn't use the armour made out of Mana, the most important ability of a Knight, the Mana Barrier...

"...Ha-ah. Eut."

-Tahk.

Kim Yu-Rin 's footsteps stopped after her feet hit a pebble on the ground. She tried desperately to hold onto her weakening consciousness, but she no longer had any more strength left to endure this bitter coldness anymore.

And so, her eyes slowly began to close.

"Fuu."

As he couldn't help it, the Orc took out one of the armours from within his body.

A black coat-style armour that easily approached the rank of Branded Goods – although he didn't add an attribute like controlling the body temperature on it, as he used the 'crimson stones' as base ingredients, it should be okay since those stones could naturally create heat.

"Ha-ah..."

Using that small window of opportunity when Yu-Rin's eyes were closed, he instantly changed the appearance of the coat into a blanket via Spiritualisation. And he wrapped her with it as she tottered around uneasily on her feet, about to fall down.

"...Uh? Huh?"

Almost right away, the warmth from the crimson stones permeated into Yu-Rin's entire body. And thanks to experiencing this warmth within the bitter coldness, her legs lost strength momentarily and she ended up falling down anyway.

"Kkeu-aht!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"...Kheum."

The Orc stared at her with slightly disbelieving eyes, before holding her slender shoulders to pull her up to her feet.

"Ah..."

After standing up straight, she glanced down at the warm blanket covering her. She had no idea where this thing came from, but this was perfectly fine since the coldness melted away like snow.

"This... Thank you."

She began to show her gratitude while still being propped up by

the Orc's arms. But weirdly enough, both of her cheeks were dyed in deep crimson for some reason.

Because of the sudden collapse of the ground, the defensive line received a damage akin to total annihilation. Several dozen Knights went missing and among them was a Highest Tier Knight who made up a considerable part of the fighting force, Kim Yu-Rin.

"...Just what happened here?"

A High Tier Knight affiliated with the Raven Order, Park Hyun pointed at a certain part of the ground, which had sunk into the distant bottom.

"After causing the earth to collapse with magic, it seems that via prepared magic circles, summoning and isolation barrier magics have been activated. That's why we can't summon them back. There is naught we can do but to wait until they find a way to reverse the summoning from inside the barrier."

Kim Hyun-Seok, the Master of the Raven Order and the commander in charge of this defensive line, spoke. Even though his own daughter had gone missing, he continued to maintain a cold and composed attitude.

"..Then, what should be our next move, commander? Miss Kim Yu-Rin, who had stepped up to the leading role, and most of her subordinates are unaccounted for, so to just evacuate like this..."

"She has lived all her life in hardship. She'll come back alive, somehow. For now, we're retreating to the rear-most defensive line and get ready for the final day's battle. We can not protect this 1st line any longer."

If this defensive line was given up, then searching for the missing Knights would become much more difficult. It might have been a rational decision to make, but at the same time, it was a cold one as well.

But the subordinate Knight couldn't say anything else.

Underneath all that soil, under that isolation barrier, Kim Hyun-Seok's daughter was trapped in there.

In other words, this decision was made by one person who would've wanted to find the missing Knights more than anyone else here.

"...Yes, sir. Understood."

*

At the same time.

An Orc and a single female Knight were still walking inside this unknown cave.

"There are magic circles engraved all over the cave. Without a doubt, they confirm that this place is artificially created. And also, even though our side had many Wizards, seeing that there aren't any measures taken to help us until now, it's likely that we were brought within this isolation barrier by a summoning-type magic."

Kim Yu-Rin murmured as she carefully studied the blue-coloured magic circle on the wall. The Orc then came to stand next to her and did the same.

Yu-Rin took a glance at the Orc, before taking a couple of steps back discreetly.

'For an Orc, he sure does resemble a human, doesn't he?'

Her face reddened again at this thought suddenly entering her head.

The way this Hero Orc acted or the way his face was shaped was really quite strange. Not only did he not have the Orc's trademark protruding teeth, his facial features were sharp and well defined. Heck, even his ponytail was long and so shiny; if his skin colour was not blue and that somewhat flattish face was changed slightly, then he'd be a cool gu...

"Eu, eu, eu..."

She quickly shook her head, hard. She could not understand why such thoughts kept popping up in her head. So much so, she was actually beginning to question her own tastes as a human being.

"Keureung!!"

It was then. The Orc that was staring at the magic circle on the wall suddenly grasped his mace real tight.

Even before Yu-Rin had the chance to get surprised at this sudden change in atmosphere, he slammed the wall hard with the mace.

Kwahang!

The powerful shock wave and the ear-shattering noise reverberated in the cave's interior.

"Kkeuk!"

Kim Yu-Rin covered her ears. Even then, she thought she could hear bells ringing in her head.

But she knew enough not to complain. Instead, she slowly approached the spot the Orc hit, and began studying it deeply.

"...There is no change."

"Keung,"

The Orc spat out a seemingly dissatisfied snort. Smiling thinly, Yu-Rin lightly patted his arm.

"Let's start walking again. And as far as I can tell, the way we walked isn't the same as before, so maybe we might find answers if we continue to move forward... Mm?"

Unlike what she said just now, she could feel some kind of change. The bitter coldness of the cave seemed to have eased just a little.

"...W, wait a minute. There is a change. Uhm... Mister Orc?"

Yu-Rin ended up using a strange honorific to address the Orc. He

simply nodded his head. (TL: Yu-Rin has been using the speech pattern usually reserved for addressing older person, when talking to Sae-Jin's Orc Form until now.)

"Right. Let's get going."

Two of them began moving their feet in a hurry.

Kwang-

Kwang-

Kwang-

Afterwards, whenever they came across a magic circle, the Orc pounded on it. Normally, Mana-induced effects could not be damaged with physical attacks, but with the attribute added onto his weapon, it was now possible.

"The 'isolation barrier' is steadily becoming unstable!"

And when he destroyed about five of them, Kim Yu-Rin shouted out in a bright voice after sensing the nearly imperceptible vibration in the isolation magic. Then the Orc let out a short chuckle and lightly patted her head again.

"...Ha, haha..."

She wasn't sure if this head patting thing was this Orc's habit or not, but she still accepted it gladly while carrying a timid smile.

Funnily enough, the one who got taken aback from her reaction was Kim Sae-Jin instead. After getting surprised, he suppressed his instinctual habit and removed his hand away from her head.

After each one of the magic circles were destroyed, the isolation barrier's effects disappeared one by one; and when around what they thought was eight hours of time had passed by, they could finally find her fainted fellow Knights.

"Ah!! Mister Orc!"

Laying down a fainted Knight on the ground, Yu-Rin hurriedly ran towards the Orc to receive him. There were two more Knights resting on his shoulders.

"It's Hye-Rin and Soo-Gyeom. Whew... What a relief. Thank you, Mister Orc."

She let out a sigh of relief.

They had divided their roles. Orc walked around the cave to find the fainted Knights and brought them here, while Yu-Rin looked after them in this safe area until they regained their consciousness.

"Please, carefully, carefully..."

Maybe because these two were quite close to her, she raised quite a fuss while receiving the two dead weights and carefully laid them down on the ground.

"Moan..."

Right on cue, the Knight lying closest began to groan. Surprised, Kim Yu-Rin quickly rushed over there. And just like the falling pieces of domino, as soon as one person woke up, people began regaining their consciousness, starting from the person they discovered first.

They initially let out a sigh of relief seeing Yu-Rin's face but then after discovering the Orc, nearly fainted again – only to sigh out in relief again after hearing her explanations on what had transpired here, and so, they had to go through quite a rollercoaster of emotions.

"In other words, it's still unclear if we can escape or not?"

"As we can't control Mana yet, looks like we still need to destroy a few more first." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin spoke in an overtly official manner to the subordinate Knight, her previously demure demeanor when interacting with the Orc nowhere to be seen now.

"Whew. Really, I'm relieved. Who knew that we could be safe thanks to that Orc b*****d..."

"...What?"

Yu-Rin's forehead creased at the words of this subordinate. The disrespectful words 'Orc b*****d' somehow got on her nerves. However, if she started picking fault with that, then that weird rumour might spread around even further...

"W, what's the matter, ma'am?"

".. That Orc g, guy can understand human words. We don't know what might happen so you need to watch what you say."

While taking a quick glance at the Orc who was stretching his neck, she whispered very quietly.

"Ah... Yes, ma'am..."

The subordinate nodded, while carrying a slightly weirded out expression.

< 23. Red Moon (4) > Fin.

Chapter 79: Red Moon (5)

With Kim Yu-Rin and the Orc as their lead, a group of 37 Knights were busy with their unplanned cave exploration for the past 24 hours or so.

And as the bitter coldness decreased to 'chilly' with the destruction of the magic circles they had come across, they encountered no other survival issues other than the slowly encroaching hunger and the onset of fatigue.

Unfortunately, strange Monsters that were suspected to be a part of the defense mechanism against the sudden disabling of the isolation barrier suddenly began to appear one after the other.

A three-headed dog that resembled the legendary Cerberus; a strange Chimera Monster that had a body of an Orc but a head of a deer; A grotesque floating eyeball with tentacles sprouting out of it, etc, etc...

Since the Knights trapped within this place couldn't use Mana at all for some reason, the Hero Orc had to step up here and well, he took care of all the threats quite easily. Even the Monsters that looked strong enough to make the Knights tense up, got smashed apart like potato crisps under the Orc's mace.

"Let's take a look. Ah, there are so many scratches..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

But still, these Monsters possessed enough power to damage the Leviathan's scales, thus he ended up receiving quite a few scars. Whenever that happened, though, Kim Yu-Rin pulled out an emergency potion from her waist-mounted bag and started applying on his body.

And the other Knights had this dumbfounded expressions as they bore witness to this... 'heart-warming' scene.

"...H, hey, isn't that getting really serious now?! Miss Yu-Rin has

never done anything like that for me until now..." (Kim Soo-Gyeom)

Among them, Kim Soo-Gyeom's body was quaking from intense jealousy. He'd jump in there and separate the two if he could just muster up some courage, but...

But, he just couldn't dare to go near that Orc with the massive, hulking physique, while also holding that destructive mace of his.

"Eiii, no way.... No way.... But wouldn't that be interesting? And we get new things to tease her with, too."

With a smiling face, Yi Hye-Rin gazed at the back of Yu-Rin and the Orc.

"Ahh~ I wish I had my phone with me so I can take some snaps of the two... How regretful, I say. So regretful."

Even inside this gloomy cave, Yi Hye-Rin didn't lose her trademark active and easy-going personality.

Unfortunately, even that upbeat attitude couldn't last forever.

The problem was with the length of this cave; it seemed endless, no matter how long they walked.

In the end, the Knights could no longer endure the accumulated fatigue after walking another 6 hours on top of the 24 they spent prior, and decided to set up a camp in the middle of the cave.

And as soon as they stopped their forward march, the loud rumbling sounds of the Knights' empty stomachs rang out in a coordinated symphony.

"Aaaahhh...."

The one thing Knights hated the most was hunger. From the early ages, the rigorous training and the cultivation of Mana led to these Knights having powerful bodies that ended up leaving them with much higher rate of metabolism compared to normal people.

It was even more severe in case of Kim Yu-Rin. The bitter pain

from the stomach acid escaping from her stomach spread throughout her body and as a result, countless large, cold drops of sweat were forming all over her.

"...Can't these fools do anything without Mana?"

Kim Sae-Jin grumbled inwardly but still, he had to seriously think about what to do here.

The leather pouch tied to his waist had one of those space expanding magic added to it. Inside, there was enough food to last him a month, as well as numerous Monster remains he got from all the hunting he did.

If he pulled those out, then he might be able to stave off starvation for now...

SFX for empty stomachs loudly grumbling

From somewhere, a loud roar exploded and shook the interior of the cave. Stunned by this, the Orc hurriedly turned his head to the side to see what's what, only to find Kim Yu-Rin with her face completely painted in red and avoiding making eye contacts with him.

"Eu-eu..."

Unable to endure her moaning, the Orc ended up pulling out the meat of wild boar with its skin neatly removed.

This vicious animal was called 'Trabong Boar', a creature that sat in the boundary between being a Monster and a regular wild beast. It was famed as a delicacy and was treated a top ingredient as a result. (TL: "트라봉 멧돼지")

"Huh!!"

"Ah, aht!!"

Every Knight's eyes present here gleamed dangerously the moment that juicy red piece of meat emerged from his pouch. Even Kim Yu-Rin became totally speechless, silently staring at the meat. And, a drop of drool fell from the corner of her mouth...

"...Ah. We don't have fire..."

But her expression sank deeply when she suddenly realised this fact.

The Orc chuckled inwardly as he began laying down Mana on the ground. Probably because the way he used Mana was fundamentally different from that of the Knights here, Sae-Jin had no trouble whatsoever in converting that Mana into flames.

"What?!"

Not only Kim Yu-Rin, but everyone else suddenly rushed in closer, their eyes shining brightly. The Orc then laid the boar meat on the fire.

SFX for oil from meat sizzling in heat (TL: d**n, even I'm getting hungry TLing this bit...)

The fatally powerful aroma and the sound effect stimulated the two senses of all the Knights present here at the same time.

But then, Sae-Jin remembered that he didn't have any seasoning with him.

"...Hmm, should I try that method now?"

And that was to pour in Mana into food and change the flavour that way. He had never try this out yet, but he was still proud of the fact that, due to the Goblin's Craftsmanship as well as its highly attuned tastebuds, his own sense of taste had reached a certain high level as well.

That's why he figured that it'd be fine to simply use Mana to get the desired level of saltiness and sweetness.

"...Keureung."

Seizing the gap between the Knights' attention, the Orc poured Mana into the meat.

Although the boar's size was pretty big, as there were many mouths to feed here, each person ended up receiving six pieces of meat only.

But after realising that he could add different attributed to food as well, Sae-Jin added the attributes that could give the sensation of 'satiety' on the meat. And that caused the Knights to fall down on the ground after being utterly moved by the food's taste as well as how it satisfied their hunger.

In other words, the best condiment in the world that made the greatest delicacies of all was surely the empty stomach.

"

Even Kim Yu-Rin was immersed deeply in the lingering aftertaste of the delicious meal, her eyes firmly closed in reverence as she relived the moment when the meat melted inside her mouth.

"Well, now... since we've eaten, why don't get some shut-eye...?"

From the back, the voice of an unknown male Knight came through, and many others agreed with this idea. And so, they began to lie down on the cold floor of the cave one by one.

"Captain, it's fine, right?"

Yi Hye-Rin inquired with a sleepy voice.

"Alright. Since we walked for a long time, let's take a small break."

Kim Yu-Rin's eyes were half closed as she replied. And that's how all the Knights fell into a slumber in an instant. But only the Orc stood up from his spot. After all, the body of the Great Warrior didn't need a whole lot of sleep, so he appointed himself as the lookout for now.

But eventually, he got bored after looking around the surroundings for about one hour and so he began studying the faces of the sleeping Knights instead. Most of their faces looked uncomfortable, but even so, the deep creases on Kim Yu-Rin's forehead especially showed no sign of easing.

Seeing her uncomfortable face, a thought suddenly popped up in his mind and Sae-Jin began making a naughty smile.

*

Drifting out of her sleep, Yu-Rin turned her body this way and that, until she felt something strange. As if she was using a pillow made out of solid metal, it was hard just beneath her head.

""

She opened her eyes in confusion, only to see the face of the Orc with his own eyes closed. Confused even more at this situation, she began surveying her surroundings, and then realised that she was using his thigh as a pillow.

"Eu-ah!!"

The shocked Kim Yu-Rin bolted right up, causing the Orc to open his eyes as well.

"...It, it's nothing. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to wake you up."

Kim Yu-Rin ended up apologising first after mistakenly believing that she used his thigh because of her usual sleeping habits.

"Kkeu-eu~"

Almost at the same time, other Knights began waking up one by one. She hurriedly tried to calm her pounding heart and did her best to look composed as she announced the resuming of their march forward.

"E, everyone, stand up!! We are moving!"

*

At the end of their lengthy march that lasted over one and a half day, Sae-Jin finally spotted what seemed to be the exit of the cave in the distance.

It was still pitch dark right up until that exit, but he could definitely tell. The space there was considerably wider than compared to the rest of the cave.

Unfortunately, he also sensed a wickedly evil energy in that place at the same time.

It was different from Monsters, but also rather different from humans as well. Instead, he smelled a familiar bloody odour. It was from Vampires.

Sae-Jin stopped his feet. When the Orc's loud footsteps came to a halt, a small commotion developed towards the back.

"Is there... something wrong?"

Kim Yu-Rin asked while cautiously grabbing hold of his arm. Her move was so smooth and natural, Sae-Jin nearly ended up blurting something aloud.

" "

He managed to shut his mouth and activated the Eyes of the Wolf to the max. Right away, his view expanded greatly until it reached the exit of the cave.

There indeed was a way out over yonder, but a strange old man was blocking the exit while holding a crystal ball and muttering some weird incantations.

But upon closer inspection, that wasn't a real old man, but some kind of a 'doll' that happened to look like one.

"...And what the heck is that now?"

Finishing up with his 'surveillance', Sae-Jin moved his gaze towards Kim Yu-Rin who was staring back at him. But since he had no avenue of passing on the information, all he could do now was to simply stare back at her.

"Uh, yes?"

Then, she opened her mouth slightly and tilted her head. That was too d**n adorably cute. The simple Orc's instincts kicked in, and he started gently stroking her cheek.

And the jaws of Yi Hye-Rin and Kim Soo-Gyeom who was witnessing this scene from right behind, dropped to the floor; meanwhile, the dazed Yu-Rin's face rapidly became dyed in red colour.

"...Kheureung..."

Belatedly realising what he had done, the Orc quickly withdrew his hand and then pointed towards the distant exit with his mace.

"What..."

However, Kim Yu-Rin and the other Knights were way too shocked to figure out what he was trying to say. He even pretended to get peeved and growled a little, but they only seem to get surprised and nothing else.

In the end, the Orc had to take the lead again. And only when the back of the Orc had gotten quite small did the dazed Knights hurriedly chase after him.

"For an Orc, that guy is pretty cool, but still..."

"I said, I know already!! It's not like that!"

At Yi Hye-Rin's carefully worded question, Yu-Rin replied back tersely, just as she had done before.

But, strangely enough, her wildly beating heart did not regain its calmness even after a long, long time.

*

The Knights and the single Orc arrived at the wide open space that led to the exit, but none of them could express their happiness. It was because of the overbearing presence of a puppetlike 'doll' that emanated a deeply unsettling energy from its body.

"Even though we can't use Mana here, but as we still have our

weapons, if we attack together from both sides, we might be able to do something," said Yi Hye-Rin as she unsheathed her longsword.

But the Orc stopped her and took a step closer to the 'doll'.

These Knights couldn't use Mana at all. And the opponent this time might have been a doll, but it was also seemingly a clone of a powerful Vampire. Most importantly, however – the desire for battle he had been suppressing until now was reacting with burning fervor, so it was perfect that he would get to fight this thing.

The Orc took a single look at the Knights behind him and then pointed at the exit behind the doll with the mace.

And before they could express their emotions...

"*SFX for a loud Orcish roar*"

...He dashed towards the doll while roaring out powerfully.

Almost immediately, several crimson tentacles shot out from the ground below and grabbed hold of his ankles, but the Orc's superhuman strength wasn't just for a show. Using nothing but his raw physical power, the Orc ripped off the binding tentacles and slammed his mace against the side of the doll.

Ttaeng!!

Kwahang!!

The Vampire's doll was smashed away like an empty can of soda, bounced around the cave and then, powerfully drilled into the ground.

The Orc pointed at the exit again which was now cleared of all obstacles.

"...Let's go!"

The Knights began to head towards the exit one after the other, with the exception of one person – Kim Yu-Rin.

"Captain, what are you doing?! Please hurry!!"

"Mister Orc, let's, let's get out of here together!"

Yu-Rin hurriedly grabbed the arm of the Orc who was about to rush towards the Vampire's doll.

But before he could respond, the entirety of the cave became dyed in red. And from these crimson walls, several sharp-pointed tentacles rapidly shot out towards the direction of Kim Yu-Rin and the Orc.

It was too late to deflect all of them. The Orc quickly pulled Yu-Rin in his arms and then activated the Leviathan's Scales to absolute max.

Unfortunately, the tentacles managed to penetrate the scales, and the painful sensation of the sharp edges cutting into his flesh crawled up his spine.

"Ahh, d**n it... Why! Eu-eu...! Eu-ah...!"

The Orc gazed down on Kim Yu-Rin within his arms. He found it rather pitiable and at the same time, felt grateful, at how hard she was struggling to summon up Mana inside her, wanting to help him out even if it was by a little.

But he judged that this stubborn woman would try to stay here until the end if he let her be, so he decided to open his mouth to her.

"...You go."

A voice more manly and burly than humanly possible resounded heavily inside the cave.

SFX for the sounds of energy rising up

As Kim Yu-Rin's face became dyed in astonishment, the Vampire's clone began emitting a seriously creepy aura.

"The exit, very long. I stay and block that b*****d, until everyone, escapes."

The Orc spoke up to here and activated the Warrior of Reversal.

This wasn't even some Hollywood action film, but just what kind of rubbish situation did he find himself in? Most of all, the presence of this woman was bothering him a great deal. After all, his heart was roaring wildly inside his chest, and he felt like he might die if he didn't go crazy against that doll b*****d right away.

So why the heck was he wasting time talking to this woman?!

"I see, you humans can't use Mana, I think because of the crystal ball. That b*****d, absorb that ball into the heart just now."

The Orc's eyes were now dyed in crimson, and at the same time, equally red and very dense aura started rising up from its body.

"That's why, no Mana, until that b*****d dead. You, no useful in this fight. Only a distraction. So, go away, quickly."

The Orc then grabbed the waist of Kim Yu-Rin, who still hadn't managed to pull herself back together from the shock, and powerfully threw her towards the exit like tossing a javelin.

"Kkyayyak!!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

It seemed that the Weapon Mastery Skill also applied in this case, as the thrown Kim Yu-Rin traced a perfect arc and scored an equally perfect goal inside the exit tunnel.

"Keep running that way."

At the end of this sentence from the Orc, the entire interior of the cave finished being painted in red.

< 23. Red Moon (5) > Fin.

Chapter 80: Red Moon (6)

The wide open area had now become the crimson arena of death; from the red walls, dozens and hundreds of glistening, razor-sharp tentacles exploded out.

Kim Sae-Jin wielded Mana and covered his entire body with it, and then changed its nature to that of ultra-high temperature white flames.

The numerous tentacles that tried to viciously attack the Orc could not penetrate past the protective flames and all melted away well before even touching his scales.

"SFX for the Orc's roar"

From inside, the Orc's brutal nature boiled over.

Sae-Jin charged towards the doll with a loud roar. It was the rush of a brightly burning flame that violently shook the cave and stirred the air inside it.

However, even against such a terror-inducing onslaught, the doll didn't flinch from fear. It only stood there, reciting the chant and getting ready for the next magic spell.

Ttuokwahng!!

Arriving right in front of the doll, the Orc slammed down with his mace. Accompanied by a stupendously loud explosion, the murky fog rose up and obscured the surroundings.

The Orc did not let up his assault on the doll even while trapped within this black dust cloud. Using the mace, he shattered the doll's barrier and then with his bare fist, fed the doll's head some knuckle sandwich.

"Kkiick, Kkheck-"

The doll let out weird noises whenever the fists connected with it.

The Orc continued to one-sidedly clobber the doll, but then suddenly, strange qigong began to gather up on its chest area. (TL: WTF?! Qigong? Really? What happened to Mana? Colour me confused...)

In that very moment, the Orc's intuition rang chilling alarm bells.

But even before he could take a step back, the gathered qigong became an ultra-sharp point of light and pierced his chest.

"Kkeuk..."

The pain was indescribable. However, that pain instead served to awaken the Orc's reckless instincts. His vision became dyed in red, and the muscles on his entire body quaked in pure rage.

[Condition Complete: receive a near-death fatal wound (1/3)]

- To become the Orc Chieftain...

An alert window popped up, but it simply could not enter Sae-Jin's cognition right now.

SFX for a seriously loud Orc's roar

Blinded by the heaven-shaking rage, the Orc used up every single potion stored inside via Spiritualisation. His wounds healed up in an instant, and his vitality soared to crazy new heights.

*

"What are you doing, Captain? Keep on running!!"

Yi Hye-Rin pulled the hesitant Kim Yu-Rin away. Without resistance, she got pulled along by Hye-Rin. It was because of the effect of Skills imbued within the Orc's voice.

Even as the Knights continued to run forward, they could clearly hear the evidence of a fierce battle taking place behind their backs – the sounds of mace destroying something, the dull sounds of heavy fighting – but most of all, the Orc's roar that shook the ground.

Whenever she heard those sounds, Kim Yu-Rin repeatedly looked back while carrying a mixed expression. Yi Hye-Rin had never seen such a longing gaze from Yu-Rin before in the past ten years they'd known each other.

'Isn't this getting way too serious?!'

Yu-Rin's peculiar reactions made Yi Hye-Rin frown deeply. Even if Yu-Rin was unfamiliar with the matters of men, but still, just why would she and an Orc, of all things...

Kwaahaaang!!

Right then, a white light bloomed up from behind and brightened the interior of the cave. Kim Yu-Rin's feet stopped moving all on their own, but at the same time, the Orc's voice deeply embedded in her mind rang out again.

'Keep running that way.'

And so, she continued to run forward.

After 30 minutes of running, the Knights could finally locate the exit of this g^{*****} n isolation barrier that made them wander around for the past 40 hours or so.

As they escaped from the exit while shouting out in joy, they were greeted by the dense, green forest, with the sunlight broken up by the leaves on tall trees shining on them.

They heard the refreshing chirping of the birds. For the Knights who were trapped in that dank and gloomy cave for the past 40 hours, it was the most welcoming and refreshing noise there could be.

"...By the way, where are we, exactly?"

But even that joy was short-lived. One of the Knights came back to reality quickly, and asked out.

"Ah! Is anyone here still able to communicate with outside?"

Although the leader of this group was originally Kim Yu-Rin, as

she was doing nothing but staring at the exit while waiting for someone, Yi Hye-Rin chose to take the lead.

"Please wait a moment!"

A Knight began to rummage through his pocket to produce a crystal ball and a GPS. The GPS didn't work inside the cave, but now it was working just fine.

"Our location?"

""

However, this Knight didn't reply and simply gazed at the coordinates shown on the GPS dumbfoundedly.

"What is it? Hey, I said, where are we?!" (Yi Hye-Rin)

The Knight only managed to swallow down his saliva only after hearing Yi Hye-Rin's frustrated shout.

"...We need to get out of here as soon as possible. This place is the deepest part of the Monster field. We're over 50 km away from the 1st defensive line."

""

In an instant, all the Knights' faces crumpled. Yi Hye-Rin let out a long sigh and then grabbed the wrist of Kim Yu-Rin who was still gazing at the cave's exit.

"Let's get out of here. It's dangerous here, Captain."

"...You're right. Everyone, let's hurry and leave this area."

It seemed that, even though she was in a dazed state, Kim Yu-Rin still managed to hear what the Knight with the GPS had said, as she resolutely gave out an order. Although there was very little strength behind her voice to call it an order, but still.

And so, the Knights ran with haste to leave the Monster field.

As they were still situated very deeply within the field, many powerful upper Mid Tier Monsters showed up, but well, threats of those levels were easily dealt with by Kim Yu-Rin's attacks.

And her attacks were unusually vicious for some reason.

"...Are you angry?"

Yi Hye-Rin cautiously asked her after a clueless Manticore decided to attack the group and promptly got turned into scraps of meat.

"No. Not at all. Just continue running. There's no time to waste."

Kim Yu-Rin spat out before starting her running again. Hye-Rin dazedly watched her back getting gradually smaller before hurriedly following after her.

*

"*Panting.... panting...*"

Inside the cave where the evidence of fierce battle still remained fresh, Kim Sae-Jin was breathing heavily.

After three hours of intense melee combat and by utilising every single one of Skills beneficial to him in this situation, he finally succeeded in disabling the doll's operations.

But his sacrifices weren't small. He just couldn't figure out what the hell was up with this damnable doll's durability – if it weren't for all those potions, he'd have collapsed first from losing way too much blood.

"Heu..."

He shoved his hand into the chest of the destroyed doll rolling around on the cave's floor. Then he grabbed and pulled out the still-beating artificial heart that felt cold to the touch. From the pierced chest of the doll, blood shot out like a fountain.

Sae-Jin took a probing look at this thing. Even after being separated from the body, it was still somehow continuously beating steadily.

[Artificial Heart] [Item rating: Treasure rank]

- An artificial heart created by taking a human heart and combining it with several hundred Mana Stones of Monsters. It'll increase the flow of Mana in one's blood vessels simply by holding it.
- Currently, there are a total of (23/30) magic spells stored within this heart. With enough Mana, it's possible to use the heart as a medium when using magic and it'll be possible to store new type of magic spells.

"...Hmm."

Now that he had looked at it, there seemed to be a variety of uses for this thing.

As it was made out of hundreds of Monster Mana Stones, absorbing it would cause unprecedented growth in his Stats, or he could use Spiritualisation and store it inside his body which would allow him to use magic.

For now, he stored the heart inside him using Spiritualisation, and began moving towards the exit, as well.

Around the same time.

By fully abusing 'Mana Movement Technique', Knights were able to escape from the Monster field in less than an hour.

The final defensive perimeter came into view in the distance. There were black smokes rising as well as the moanings of the wounded everywhere, but the defense operation had already been concluded successfully.

"Uh?! There are Knights approaching us over there!"

Someone shouted out loudly while pointing towards the Knights trudging out from the mountainside. Right away, thousands and tens of thousands of eyes focused there.

"Wow, wowee~. We can finally go home~."

While checking out Kim Yu-Rin's mood, Yi Hye-Rin stretched her limbs out grandly. Unfortunately, Yu-Rin's gloomy expression showed no signs of abating anytime soon.

"...Uh! That's Order Master Hyun-Seok!!"

Just in time, Kim Hyun-Seok's face could be seen in the distance. Thinking this was a good chance, Yi Hye-Rin quickly shouted out. Only then did Yu-Rin's stiff expression change slightly.

"He must've been really worried... What are you doing? You should hurry~."

"Eh? Uh? H, hey, wait!"

Hye-Rin didn't miss this chance and forcibly pushed Yu-Rin's back. Although surprised, she still managed to quickly walk towards Kim Hyun-Seok.

"You've safely returned?"

Kim Hyun-Seok smiled softly while looking at her.

"...Yes, sir. All 37 missing Knights, reporting their safe return."

"Well done."

Kim Hyun-Seok was worse than a worst miser when it came to praising his own daughter but it was different this time. He didn't lose the smile even for a second as he proudly patted her shoulders.

"Thank you. You worked hard."

""

He only spoke two things. But Kim Yu-Rin was extremely moved by the meaning behind those words. Her moist eyes, wet from the emotions repressed within her, clearly demonstrated her current feelings.

"Let us go home." (Kim Hyun-Seok)

Kim Yu-Rin carefully wiped the corners of her eyes and

resolutely nodded her head.

"...Yes, sir."

*

Even after finishing up a press conference, Kim Yu-Rin had to endure the harassment of hundreds of reporters on her way back home.

The questions that didn't deserve an answer were repeatedly asked, and she also couldn't really figure out what they were on about when asking her about a scandal that developed inside the cave.

As expected. She often thought about this, but for her it was far simpler and easier to deal with Monsters rather than reporters.

"...F1111-woo."

But after she had returned to her empty house, a part of her heart became rather lonesome all of a sudden. Maybe it was because the place was not inhabited for the last ten days, her house felt so cold and empty.

Feeling lonely for some reason, Yu-Rin turned on the tap for the bathtub and to liven up the quietness of the empty room somehow, she switched on the TV.

– It is now revealed that the one responsible for aiding the escape of the 37 Knights was the Hero Orc.

"Ah..."

The news coming out of the news channel in that moment was talking about the Hero Orc. And so, Yu-Rin ended up naturally thinking about him again.

However, the Orc was not here with her. Only that, his dignified scent and the manly voice remained clearly in her memories, making her heart ache deeply.

She found herself wondering. Did the Orc safely escape the cave

alive? Or did he... fail to do so and perished in the middle of the battle?

"...I want to see him agai... Uh?! Huh?"

After getting utterly shocked by the words involuntarily leaking out of her, Yu-Rin hurriedly covered up her mouth.

- According to the testimonies of the Knights present, the Orc displayed a heroical demeanour by destroying isolation barrier that had trapped the Knights inside, as well as providing sustenance to the starving Knights.

The news broadcast continued on. The memories of yesterday came back to her in full force, when she was still with the Orc inside the cave.

That warm blanket and the delicious food, the firm thigh as well as his gentle touches...

When she remembered up to here, her heart began pounding madly away suddenly.

"...Am I really going crazy?"

She quickly switched the TV off and held her crimson cheeks. Maybe it was her instinctive hunger rearing its head with vengeance after 28 years of abstinence or something. But to fall for someone who wasn't even a human... Wasn't that a bit wrong?

SFX for water overflowing off the edge of the bathtub

By then, the water began to overflow from the bathtub.

'Right. Let's just take a bath and cleanse all the weird thoughts out of my head.'

She took off her clothes and headed straight towards the bathroom.

"Oh, that's good..."

Unfortunately for her, even after dipping herself into the

suitably warm water, the thoughts of that Orc didn't easily dissipate.

"...Surely, he didn't die, right? After all, he was so strong..."

No, instead, she continued to think about him. The images of Orc's martial prowess back then and his dependable back continued to circle around in her mind.

Feeling frustrated, she closed her eyes shut and sighed out grandly below the water's surface. Bubbles floated up on the water as a result.

One week later.

"It's not even funny with Yu-Rin Unni's situation anymore. I mean, she's loitering around the Hero Orc's village everyday under the pretext of hunting, you know?"

"...Wow. Seriously?"

At Yi Hye-Rin's words, Yu Sae-Jung made a surprised face.

"Mm. Serious. Everyday, as soon as she's done with her duties, she goes there."

Right next to Yu Sae-Jung, as if his throat was burning up, Sae-Jin was gulping down lots of water. Yu Sae-Jung looked at him confusedly for a moment or two, before seizing this opening by grabbing hold of his hand.

"Oppa, it's not to your liking?"

"Hmm? Uh... No, it's nothing."

Kim Sae-Jin shook his head, while inwardly wondering whether he should show his 'face' to Yu-Rin at least once.

"...But what's the relationship between you two? Are you really dating?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

Yi Hye-Rin's forehead creased a little as she surveyed the two.

"No..." (Kim Sae-Jin)

At his quick reply, Yu Sae-Jung made an expression of getting really, really hurt by that.

"...Not yet." (Kim Sae-Jin)

As soon as he added a bit more, her expression brightened slightly.

"But what does that even mean?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

Yi Hye-Rin sharply glared at him with the disbelieving eyes, before giving a serious warning to Yu Sae-Jung.

"Miss Sae-Jung, you gotta be careful now. This is the classic case of leading people on."

"Yes, I'm aware. That's why, I'm gonna definitely settle this once and for all later on."

"Oh, please. Stop. You're still too young for that." (Kim Sae-Jin)

As his guilty conscience got poked, Sae-Jin flicked the forehead of Yu Sae-Jung who had made an unnecessary declaration.

"Ouch! What do you mean, I'm too young? I'm an adult now."

Yu Sae-Jung poured out her complaints. All Sae-Jin could do then, was to chuckle and overlook it.

< 23. Red Moon (6) > Fin.

Chapter 81: Calm Before the Storm (1)

Deep under the Geumgang Mountain, there existed a Sanctuary belonging to Nosferatus.

"It was beyond our expectations that the entire portal would completely be destroyed... But, somehow, our mission is a success, sir." (Unnamed Nosferatu)

Unlike those Vampires that had blended into the human society, Nosferatus had a different end goal.

They hadn't publicly announced it yet in order to avoid the gazes of the omniscient and omnipotent Lord of all Vampires, but the thing was, they did not want to return to their original world.

In a way, it was an expected response from them who were treated with deep disdain and contempt by the rest of the Vampire species.

To them, it was far more preferable to live among the humans and drink animal blood, rather than to suffer a life worse than that of a livestock where one's neck would be in constant risk of being cut off because of a single mistake.

"Plans are advancing much faster than our expectations. What is the response from the Lord?" (Suterte)

"The Lord is yet to awaken from his hibernation, thus he is not aware of anything, sir."

So, the leader of the Nosferatus, 'Suterte' decided to involve humans so they could disrupt the House of Bathory's plans to open up a portal back to their home world.

Of course, even he didn't expect the portal to be thoroughly destroyed like this.

No, what he thought would happen was that, after the event of the Red Moon had ended, the number of Monsters within the Monster field would have decreased rather dramatically, and so, the Knights would take this opportunity to search for their missing colleagues and then, accidentally stumble onto the portal. In case that didn't happen, then he was planning to let them know anonymously, too.

"On top of this, unlike the Vampire Lord's original plan, the Bathorys were too impatient. They were thinking of completing everything before the end of the hibernation. That is why they will do everything in their power to make sure none of this blunder will enter the Lord's ears." (Unnamed Nosferatu)

Suterte stroked his lengthy beard and harrumphed to himself quietly.

"That's why we need to be wary of the fury of the House of Bathory, not the Vampire Lord. There should not be any evidence of our involvement behind, but that Bathory woman is a simpleminded moron who moves on nothing but a feeling, after all." (Unnamed Nosferatu)

"Phew... Seeing such a stupid woman wield so much power, makes me fear just what she might do next. Fine, that's that but, what is the progress on the order I gave you?" (Suterte)

"Sir. As you've correctly predicted, the Bathorys have handed over the information regarding our Sanctuary and its interior layout to the Lycan. However, both the Lycan and the SID have not shown any activity until now."

"Heummm..."

Suterte fell into a deep thought after listening to the subordinate's report.

The Lycan – a name he'd never heard before. But in the world of Mercenaries, people changing their names or acting in anonymity were as common as the stars in the night sky. And judging by the unfathomable way his actions had been so far, it was a sure thing

that he had an incredible wealth of experience in dealing with such matters.

A Mercenary that possessed abilities to detect the omens of the Red Moon, and to sniff out and murder those hidden Vampires – not just any, but those incredibly dangerous members of the Bathory family only...

"If that's the case, there's a chance that the Lycan might have figured out our ultimate goal. At least, he could have determined that we are not a threat for now."

Suterte let out a weighty exclamation of admiration while thinking, Really, this Lycan is someone who exceeds my expectations.

"So, we only have to focus all of our attention on the Vampire Lord who should be waking up soon."

The Lord possessed the authority of life or death over all Vampires.

Of course, that didn't mean the Lord possessed the literal means to control the fates of every Vampire, but it wasn't too far off that notion since this being could freely control their Vampiric instincts.

"Yes, sir. Understood."

The subordinate bowed his waist in a disciplined manner before melting into the shadows.

*

At the same time, the underground training facility of The Monster.

Kim Sae-Jin was going through his daily martial arts training.

"Miss Kim Yu-Rin?"

"...Ah, yes?"

"What are you doing?"

"That... No, it's nothing."

Unfortunately, the current state of his tutor was a bit of a mess.

Kim Yu-Rin hadn't been paying much attention to their sparring session at all, instead choosing to sniff out Sae-Jin's scent as if to seek out the faint smell of the Orc from him or some such.

Although there were parts that were similar, scents were different in each of his Forms. So, he was not worried about being discovered, but still, this sort of wasting valuable time for training was proving to be somewhat troublesome for him.

"I am really sorry but... is it okay if we end today's training here?"

Kim Yu-Rin sounded rather miserable while scratching the back of her head. Her expression right then looked really complicated.

For the past two weeks, the time she spent staring into nothing in a daze increased in frequency. Instead of forgetting about what had happened, her yearning only became deeper and deeper. Her worries of whether this feeling she carried around was a crush or not also deepened as well.

If it indeed was affection, then she had to immediately severe it away.

The reality was not a fairy tale. The beauty and the beast, or more correctly, an Orc and a female Knight. That would never be realised, and it should never be realized as well.

But, just as they said, "belatedly blowing winds are far more terrifying" – until now, she had never found any man interesting, but she couldn't stop thinking about that Orc.

No, she couldn't help but to think about him. Whenever she switched on the TV, or when going to her Knights Order, the conversation regarding the Orc continued on, so the memories of

back then ended up stimulating her even more...

"...Excuse me, Miss Kim Yu-Rin? Nowadays..."

"N, no, it's definitely not that."

She even developed a sixth sense lately, in recognizing what other people wanted to ask her about and then denying it unequivocally.

""

"It's just that, I've been mentally and physically fatigued of late. It must be the aftereffects of the Red Moon... I apologise."

She couldn't even meet Sae-Jin's eyes. He wordlessly stared at her for a moment or two, before nodding his head briefly.

"I understand. I guess it can't be helped, then."

He sheathed the practice sword back into the scabbard while muttering out.

"...Thank you."

Kim Yu-Rin too lowered her sword and hurriedly shuffled towards the showers. Sae-Jin looked at her back and sighed out, before shouting at her.

"I will be going ahead. There are matters I need to attend to."

"Oh, yes. It's fine."

He quickly started walking. It was in order to resolve her rather serious 'lovesickness', even if it was by a little bit. He already knew where she'd go next. If he waited for her there, she'd show up eventually.

*

The still-chilly Spring winds brushed past the forest's vegetation. Kim Sae-Jin the Hero Orc was busy hiding behind a bush, waiting for a certain someone to show up.

SFX for footsteps

After waiting for around 30 minutes, he could hear footsteps. The Orc turned his head towards the direction of the sounds.

It was, just as he thought, Kim Yu-Rin.

This woman, who said she was too tired and had ended the two hour training session only after 30 minutes, came here to the Monster field that would've made her more 'tired'.

"Eu-eum..."

Yu-Rin got to the foot of the tall walls of the Orc village, started looking around this way and that.

And then, after making up her mind, she cautiously gathered Mana to her feet...

Pang!

...By using an instant combustion, she soared up into the sky and easily jumped over the wall.

"...Huh?!"

By eyeing up a good timing, he planned to show his face to her, but now, he had fallen into a bit of panic here. He sure as hell didn't expect her to be that proactive by actually intruding into the sleeping quarters of a man...

For now, he exited from the bushes and then, decided to wait for her at a suitable distance from the wall, as she'd coming out of the village soon enough.

And so, another 20 minutes flowed by.

He sensed the flow of Mana beyond the wall and right away, a figure of a person soared up past it. Kim Yu-Rin landed softly on the overgrown weeds on the ground.

"Ha-ah..."

It seemed like that she had confirmed the absence of the Hero Orc inside. She spat out a grand sigh containing all her lamentations, before dropping her head low and started walking.

SFX for the sound of rustling winds

At the same time, Spring winds blew by. Riding on the currents of air, the scent of the nostalgic past deeply imprinted in her heart tickled her nose.

"…!"

Kim Yu-Rin hurriedly raised her head.

And that's how she finally got to see the Orc she so desperately wanted to meet again.

"Ah..."

Her usually large and clear eyes became twice as big as she ceased all movements, like a still from a paused video. She wasn't even breathing out in this moment.

The Orc ignored her for now and trudged towards the walls.

"...Ex, excuse me!"

Figuring that the Orc would walk right past her if she didn't do something, Yu-Rin hurriedly grabbed his arm.

"Ah... y, you managed to make it out alive."

Her face red like a young girl, both her hands gathered in front of her chest – she cautiously began speaking to the Orc.

Now that she was looking at him, she could clearly feel her heart beating powerfully. They were the heartbeats of emotions that she could barely contain.

" "

However, the Orc didn't say anything. No, he was simply gazing back at her.

"Uhm, can I... hear your voice one more time?"

They said that the person in need was more desperate. The

person in need here was obviously Kim Yu-Rin.

Although she was very earnest in her plea, her actions only made Sae-Jin to cringe inwardly. Without realising it, the corners of his mouth were twitching.

"I'm begging you. Ah, I didn't mean anything by that. It's just that, I'd like to convey my thanks for the time back then..."

Completely unaware of what Sae-Jin was thinking, Yu-Rin was very serious with her plea. Although, no one would be able to figure out how conveying her gratitude and him speaking out had anything to do with each other...

"...Go away."

That was the first thing the Orc said. At his cold words, Kim Yu-Rin's body shuddered briefly.

She was already expecting it, but now that she had faced rejection, it still hurt. However, despite her hands shaking like leaves, she managed to pull out an item from her Expanding Pocket. It was another Expanding Pocket.

"This... is to show my gratitude."

"Don't need it."

The Orc rejected it bluntly and tried to walk past her. He thought that she should give up if it was this much, but then, she was more tenacious than he bargained for. She powerfully grabbed the Orc's hand that was as big as her head and forcibly placed it in there.

"I won't bother you again anymore. You'll find a lot of potions inside. Please, drink or apply them when you're injured. Then, I'll... go away now."

Her voice was trembling. She lowered her head and turned around to leave, her heart now torn into million pieces after receiving the Orc's uncaring attitude.

And the appearance of her back weakly walking away looked so

pitiful and lonely. The overflowing confidence of the past Kim Yu-Rin was nowhere to be seen.

That was why, the Orc let out a grand sigh, and then called out to her.

"Stop."

Fortunately, she was a good listener.

He slowly approached the stopped woman, and unfastened the wrist protector made out of corundum from his own wrist.

"Take."

At a first glance, it looked way too big, but it had an attribute called 'Auto-Adjust' that would adjust its size to suit her. The Orc handed the wrist protector over to her.

But she didn't take it. Only that, her gaze continued to stare downwards, while biting on her lips.

""

He wondered if she was too deeply hurt. Even though that was his intention to begin with, but now that he was here, he became somewhat dumbfounded. Just why the heck was this 28 year-old almost-a-spinster acting like a teenage girl having her first crush...

"Take. Think as reward, for your gifts."

He spoke up to here and then lifted her chin so she could look him in the eyes. She appeared so vulnerable right then, with wetness pooling around her eyes, making her quite lovely to behold.

The Orc's consciousness became hazy in that moment, and the other thoughts nearly took over, but thankfully, the effects of the libido-limiting potion was still working its magic.

"...Take."

Just like what she did before, he took her hand and forcibly

shoved the wrist protector there. Then, he turned around to leave.

"Excuse me... Will we meet again in the future?"

From his back, the winds carried her meek and hopeful voice over to him.

"No. Don't come here anymore."

But the Orc replied in a cold, indifferent manner.

Despite that, she stood there for a long time chasing after his back with her eyes, while clutching the simple-but-tough wrist protector tightly.

*

"D**n it all to hell!!"

A man wearing a robe angrily slammed down on a desk. The furniture made out of marble split into two under that single fist strike.

"How can our portal collapse suddenly like that?!" (The angry Vampire)

Lady Bathory hated wasting time. On top of that, a rumour speaking of her growing bored of TV began spreading around yesterday as well. In other words, there wasn't much time left before her harsh scolding would begin in earnest.

"...We also are not... Maybe, the magic spell of the Lich, under the influence of the Red Moon, got mixed up with ours, or it's possible that a third party have gotten in the way."

"This son of a... What happened to the artificial heart?" (The angry Vampire)

The artificial heart that literally took bloody tears and sweat to create was truly a treasure crafted by the hands of the Vampires. Not only was it valuable all on its own, there was no doubt that it'd become a crucial medium in opening up their portal. It was an item they could not afford to lose or let someone rob them of it.

"We're currently looking for ways of locating it, sir. We suspect that one of the Knights who got trapped there might be in possession of it. For now, we are trying to trace the energy coming off from the heart, but..."

"Fuu..."

Apostle Beren angrily massaged his temples. (TL: "베렌")

And to make things even worse, the crystal rolling on the ground was slowly dyeing in red.

It was the sign that Lady Bathory was calling for him.

< 24. Calm Before the Storm (1) > Fin.

Chapter 82: Calm Before the Storm (2)

Late at night.

In order to experiment with the artificial heart, Kim Sae-Jin headed to the underground training facility below the Society's main building.

"Guild Master?"

However, his heart nearly jumped out of his mouth when he heard a voice that shouldn't have been here in the first place. Quickly shoving the heart inside his pocket, he turned around, trying to look as unflustered as possible.

"...Keum. Mister Joo Ji-Hyuk. You haven't gone home yet?"

"Oh, yes, somehow. This place has got a good environment so, well, I forgot the passage of time while training and ended up falling asleep for a bit here."

Joo Ji-Hyuk pointed towards the 'nap room' and embarrassedly scratched the back of his neck.

"Oh, really? But isn't the Dawn also famous for its great training environment as well?"

"True, but that place doesn't even hold a candle to this place. I mean, there are three Athany dolls here in this training facility, each with different effects, after all... Even if I train here nonstop for 12 hours straight, I feel less fatigued than when I'm training at the Dawn's facility for less than 6."

Sae-Jin nodded his head begrudgingly. Finally, he was able to figure out why all his Society members, even including Kim Yu-Rin who wasn't, preferred to use this place instead of their own Knight Orders' facilities.

"And thanks to this story doing the rounds, there is a bit of chaos unfolding on the pages of the Dawn's community chat rooms, what with people wishing to tour this place. Hahaha."

Joo Ji-Hyuk let out a proud laughter.

"Ah, haha... So, that's how it is."

"That's correct. Well then, I should get going right about now. Take care of yourself, Guild Master."

Before he knew it, the Society members and the employees changed the way they addressed him, from the Society Chairman to that of the Guild Master.

That didn't mean that The Monster was approved as a Guild, though. No, instead, thanks to numerous obstructions, his Society got rejected outright after not even being able to enter the upper rankings in the last year's evaluation.

But the members and employees continued to call him as the Guild Master, probably out of a sense of belonging, or even that of the pride of working in this place.

"Oh... yes, well. Take care."

In all honesty, Sae-Jin liked this new term, too.

"Will do!" (Joo Ji-Hyuk)

After seeing Joo Ji-Hyuk away, Sae-Jin pulled out the artificial heart from his inner pocket once more. The appearance of the heart the size of his palm still beating intermittently remained quite grotesque, even now.

"...Isn't there something I can do about the look of this thing?"

Even if there were numerous ways of using this thing, as long as it looked this creepy, using it publicly was out of the question.

'If I decrease its overall volume, maybe I can cover its shortcoming by turning it into an accessory, like a necklace or a ring.'

For now, he decided to worry about that later, and poured in his

Mana into the artificial heart. There was a total of 23 magic spells recorded in this thing – and the one he wanted to try out here was...

"Let's start off with the isolation barrier first."

As soon as he murmured out, from the ground beneath his feet, a black coloured wave spread out in a circle and dyed the entirety of the training facility in black.

"...Ohhhh."

He let out a small exclamation. If he used up Mana Stones as base ingredients within this space, then he'd be able to bring forth many different effects, just like how it was back then in that cave. Such as, that bitter coldness, or inability to use Mana, etc.

"Hmm. It's pretty good."

When he extracted all the Mana from the heart, the barrier disappeared instantaneously.

"Next up is..."

It was time to try out an attack spell. Starting off with, that point of light spell the damnable doll used to pierce his heart with.

Some said that good things could come out from bad situations. It definitely applied to South Korea's case, as the Red Moon proved to be a fortunate event for them in the end.

The reason for the mix-up of Monsters was because of the upheaval of the earth; during this Red Moon, countless Monsters tried to attack the cities, only to run into the defensive cordon – and got themselves promptly killed. That led to the Monster field emptying up, which in turn, gave the government the opportunity to properly divide the areas according to the Monster ranks once more.

All thanks to the Red Moon, of course.

The work dividing the Monster field was carried out quickly.

The Monster Tier separation equipment submitted for evaluation by the Monster defense-related company called 'TM' that had appeared quite suddenly, was proven to possess far better performance than already-existing machines. So, the government duly awarded the contract to this new company.

The previous company responsible to installation and management of the existing infrastructure tried resisting the change by using many dirty tactics, but behind this 'TM', there was a giant called the Dawn Corporation, so the whole affair was easily solved in the end.

The Knights found the defeat of the company that continued to exist solely through corruption and solicitation from this incident a wonderful event worth celebrating.

And so, after some time from the end of the Red Moon had passed by, the Monster field was finally reopened.

========

This is that habitat of the Hero Orcs. Please be careful not to stimulate the Orcs badly. It is possible that consequences will be dire, if some harm is done to the Orcs.

========

"Hmm..."

While coming out to visit the Hero Orc village located at the corner of the Mid Tier hunting ground during his hunting, Sae-Jin found this signboard out in front.

He briefly wondered if the government had done this, but after a cursory inspection, he found a carefully inscribed Raven Order insignia at the back, which gave him some clues as to who put this thing here.

"...She's really devoted, isn't she."

Sae-Jin slowly shook his head. He did hear that Yu-Rin still came by 2, 3 times a week even now...

SFX for an aggressive barking of a dog

It was then. He heard a voracious barking from his back. Not thinking too much about it, he turned around to see what's what.

A single Monster was glaring at him. A giant bipedal wild dogtype creature, its entire body coated in blackish metal, the socalled 'Iron Gnoll'.

SFX for yet another aggressive barking of a dog

The Gnoll continued to spit out its saliva like an exploding waterfall and got ready to attack, but Sae-Jin simply took a look at this creature, before releasing Mana from his hand.

That Mana noisily vibrated as it rose up on his palm, before changing into a small but ultra-sharp blue dagger.

The Proficiency Level for the 'Mana Body' has risen up quite a bit, allowing him to form such small weapons with his Mana alone. Although its hardness and density fell below that of high grade metals, but still, there were uses for such a weapon.

What played out next was as exactly as recorded within his instincts. Or, was that his Skill, instead?

He grasped this dagger and then threw it towards the Monster. The blade left his hand and drew a blue-coloured trajectory before stabbing the creature's forehead.

SFX for – sigh – yet another aggressive barking of a dog, but shorter

If it was any regular human, such a wound would prove to be fatal but the body of a Gnoll was quite hardy. Too bad, the effect of the dagger hadn't ended yet.

Suffering from a heaven-cursing rage, the Gnoll tried to extract the dagger stabbing it in the forehead. But, at that very moment the creature touched the dagger, it reverted to formless Mana and permeated into the open wound.

And so, the Mana that had entered the Gnoll's head, followed Sae-Jin's will to the letter and became a hotly burning flame.

-Kkeuk!!

The Monster couldn't even let out a cry in anger before falling dead with its insides thoroughly burnt to a crisp.

This was one of the methods Sae-Jin came up with to utilise the Mana Body.

Although this move could be seen as a one-hit kill attack, it didn't mean he could use this against every Monster out there.

First of all, Monsters ranked upper Mid Tier had this thing called 'Mana skin' – like most Knights – which meant their skin and muscles were thickly saturated with Mana. With his current Proficiency Level, he couldn't even hope to pierce such flesh at all.

As for the Mid Tiers, it still remained a rather inefficient method akin to a cheap trick that would only work on Monsters such as this Iron Gnoll that only had tough exteriors but weak innards.

After the ending this boring hunt, Sae-Jin checked out how much Mana remained within him. Almost half of it was gone. As expected, the Mana expenditure was too great. He should've just killed it with his sword or something.

"Hey! It's over th...."

With a good timing, a hunting party comprising of three people hurriedly arrived on the scene. It seemed they had been chasing this Gnoll down for a while.

"What happened here?"

It was a party of two men and one woman. They confusedly looked at the Iron Gnoll sprawled down on the ground for a short moment. It was understandable, as they couldn't see any obvious exterior wounds on this Monster.

""

In the end, they raised their heads with expressions of utter defeat.

They had been trying to lure this Monster towards their carefully laid-out trap for the last three hours. In other words, this Monster was the entirety of their daily hunting quota...

"...Uh?"

However, the woman Hunter with the worst expression of all, let out a small exclamation of surprise after discovering a man looking at them from beyond the corpse of the Gnoll.

It was the Chairman of The Monster, Kim Sae-Jin.

He was a famous man in the online communities, various Cafes, as well as Social Networking Sites, well known for his tall height and manly countenance. After all, even she herself was one of his 4 million-strong SNS followers.

Belatedly, the other two recognised him as well, and they slowly approached him with their faces slightly blushed.

"Uhm, hello there, You... are Mister Kim Sae-Jin, yes?"

"Ahh, yes, I am. Hello."

Kim Sae-Jin smiled warmly towards the nervous trio. Maybe it was because the number of strangers recognising him had increased by a great deal, he had gotten used to dealing with people whom he had never met before, but somehow, knew him well.

"Uhm... Ha, have you come to hunt today?"

"Yes, I have. But this Gnoll wasn't part of the plan. It just jumped at me out of the blue."

"Oh, that. Actually..."

The Hunters then proceeded to explain what happened in detail.

The Iron Gnolls were known to be particularly strong among the Mid Tiered Monsters thanks to their hardy exterior, and as a consequence, their remains fetched high prices.

So after discovering a lone Iron Gnoll, these three created a trap and tried to lure it there for the past three hours. The Monster was busy chasing them, until it suddenly began sniffing the air, then it changed its direction hastily and ran off to elsewhere.

"...Ah-ha."

Kim Sae-Jin realised that it was because of his scent.

"So that's what happened. Then, please take the remains. It's fine with me."

Sae-Jin pointed at the dead Gnoll and told the trio to take it with them. The truth was, he must've had reached the limit of absorbing Mana Stones for the growth of his Stats, since absorbing one from a Mid Tier Monster would raise only about a few decimal points at best.

"R, really?!"

The hunting party let out a shout of joy.

"Yes. It's yours."

Kim Sae-Jin smiled graciously.

The Hunters carried truly-moved expressions as they bowed their waists 90 degrees four times in a row – before politely inquiring if they could take a group selfie... if it wasn't too much trouble.

Sae-Jin happily accepted this request as well. And the trio went home very, very satisfied from this encounter with a friendly celebrity.

And exactly three hours after this incident.

As Sae-Jin was about to head home having finished up his work, he got a phone call. It was from Yu Sae-Jung.

- "Oppa, someone wrote a post about you on SNS and now it's a big news."
 - "...Huh?"
- "Everyone is praising you for your nice deeds. You should check it out."

"Keheum."

The life of a celebrity... It seemed that pretty much anything could become a news topic. He logged onto a news webpage while trying to look like he was suffering a bit. However, there was a wide smile pasted on his lips bright enough to light up the heavens.

*

Before anyone knew it, the sunlight became hotter and the coldness had become a story of distant yesterdays. As Kim Sae-Jin took a walk outside, he could definitely sense the silent encroachment of Summer.

"It sure does resemble a proper theme park, doesn't it." (Kim Sae-Jin)

Although Sae-Jin had taken a step back from the Society's administration, currently he was walking around its grounds with Soh Yeo-Jin in tow after she requested for it.

Originally, this area was too close to the Monster field – less than 40 km – so there were plenty of Knights, Hunters and Wizards around but never a big number of civilians. But now, he could see parents who brought along their children, couples out for a date, and even some folks who were most likely foreign tourists. The size of the so-called floating population had grown enormously.

"Looks like it's okay for us to stop looking around here."

"Eh? But we still have other facilities to look at, such as the hotel and the cinema complex? There are lots of people there too, sir."

Soh Yeo-Jin spoke as she pointed towards the group of buildings

over yonder. Sae-Jin carried a light smile as he shook his head.

"I don't have enough time for that, unfortunately. Besides all that, though – there are truly a lot of people here?"

"I know, right? Maybe it's because Miss Sae-Jung and Miss Yu-Rin are busy shooting their variety show in here, the number of people coming through has quadrupled compared to last year. If we can grow a bit more, then this area can very well rival the city centre where the Eden Tower is located at in a near future, sir. Honestly, we are the true reason why the real estate prices around these parts have rocketed up, you know~."

Soh Yeo-Jin's spoke with lots of pride in her voice.

"Is that so?"

"Yes, sir. Really, we made the correct decision to forcibly increase the Society's lands. The pure profit alone is so huge..."

He was feeling really great. He was happy in the knowledge that all these lands and buildings were all his.

"Oh, right. What's the progress on that assignment I gave you?"

He suddenly remembered something else.

The special event for the Orc Blacksmith.

Two months ago, during the fourth night of the Red Moon when the waves of Monsters were still thick and strong.

With his entire Stats boosted by over twice as much under the influence of the Red Moon, Sae-Jin crafted a weapon using the Orc's Smithing Technique. And that ended up becoming an eye-poppingly amazing creation.

Out of all the weapons that could be made by an Orc Great Warrior, this must have been the pinnacle – a longsword that proudly earned the 'Treasure' grade ranking. The name was the Orc's Longsword for now, but he'd be able to change it the moment this sword goes on sale, since the Orc Blacksmith would

officially be recognised as a Master craftsman from then.

"Yes, sir. It's going well. We've already began the promotion and the advertisement via Guild's homepage as well as through its SNS profile. Even Miss Sae-Jung and Miss Yu-Rin have mentioned it during the filming of their respective shows. There seemed to be a lot of interest from many Knights, that's for sure."

Kim Sae-Jin nodded his head in satisfaction.

The Orc Blacksmith hadn't produced a weapon in the last three months or so, and people had already begun criticising him from breaking the 'promise' or some such, but he figured that all of them would shut their collective mouths up if he told them this sword was the reason for the lengthy delay.

"That's good. By the way, it seems like the Orc Blacksmith wishes to sell this sword through an auction. What are your thoughts regarding this, Miss Yeo-Jin?"

Sae-Jin wondered just how much this treasure would go for, under the current climate where the inflation had been going through the roof thanks to Monsters' appearance, as well as the advent of mysterious crafts known as Wizardry and Alchemy.

"An auction? Then, there's a chance of another country acquiring the sword..."

In the past, the Orc Blacksmith got a lot of flak for selling a Branded Goods-graded item to another country. But this time, this weapon was something that might not be seen in another hundred years, something on the level of being a 'cultural asset'.

Naturally, Soh Yeo-Jin got cautious as she thought about the kind of calamity that could unfold when this weapon got taken by another country...

"The Orc specifically requested for it. Since things have come this far, he said it'd be better to spread our name internationally. I hear the best Blacksmith in the world is still a person named Hepaitos? We should help the Orc take away that title, don't you think?"

Kim Sae-Jin smiled faintly.

< 24. Calm Before the Storm (2) > Fin.

Chapter 83: Calm Before the Storm (3)

[Will you evolve into the Lycanthrope Form?]

Kim Sae-Jin in his Athany Form was floating on the water filling up his bathtub, with his gaze firmly focused on the alert window, currently superimposed on the ceiling.

The Lycanthrope.

At first, it was his end goal. But now, this thing where he couldn't readily decide on what to do next, had become the proverbial Pandora's Box.

"Kkeeing..."

There were two big reasons why he was so reluctant to evolve into the Lycanthrope.

First of all, there was a high possibility of his outward appearance changing after his Human Form and the Wolf Form merged.

Up until now, the Human Kim Sae-Jin's face remained broadly the same as before, but due to the qualities of a Wolf slowly encroaching on him, certain facial features did sharpen up a bit. But if he chose to become the Lycanthrope, he just could not tell how his face might look like afterwards.

Right now, he had made many personal connections. If he went ahead with the evolution and his appearance changed way too dramatically compared to the Kim Sae-Jin of now...

Now that would be the worst of all the terrible calamities he could potentially face.

Second problem was the racial tendencies of the Lycanthrope.

The Lycanthropes of the legends were infamous for their hotblooded and violent tempers. So much so, they were even treated as the 'talking Monsters' by the fellow Soo-ins. If he were to win against such instincts, at minimum, the Human Kim Sae-Jin had to level up not only his physical strength, but his mental resistance as well – the so-called 'mentality of a human'.

"Phew~ phew~"

Sae-Jin shot out water gun out of his mouth. The spouts of water drew a straight line as they hit the ceiling where the alert window was superimposed on.

Leveling up this Athany Form could also be one of the ways to balance out the Lycanthrope Form as well. However, the risk associated with evolving this Form was far greater than any other Forms.

One just had to think about the real Leviathan that was currently roaming out in the expansive Atlantic Ocean, or taking a nap under a tremendously great depth.

The flow of time, the currents of the oceans, the blazing sun – all the things and elements provided by the mother nature became the foundation of this creature's strength, which made the ranking of a Leviathan as 'unclassifiable'. It wasn't an exaggeration to call the Leviathan 'a dragon of the seas'.

Kim Yu-Rin could somehow contend with the Leviathan that had appeared in the Han River of Seoul only because the summoning process had greatly limited its overall might. If it appeared in the middle of the city without being summoned, but by its own volition...

Then Seoul would've become nothing more than a collection of collapsed rubble by now.

"...Now that I think about it, my body has grown a little, hasn't it?"

As he was thinking about Leviathan-related matters, he suddenly came to a realisation. Was it because Athany was the so-called growth-type Monster that leveled up simply with the passage of time while being in contact with any form of moisture? The bathtub had definitely gotten smaller for his body compared to before.

"Kkeung."

Feeling rather uneasy about this development, Sae-Jin quickly changed back to Human Form and left the tub.

He took a glance at the clock – it said 11AM. The scheduled time for training was almost here.

*

Ever since the Red Moon concluded, Kim Sae-Jin concentrated on training that would level up his Human Form.

Under the advent of the Red Moon, the Orc Great Warrior's instincts had become harder to control, that was why – but also, he was mindful of the undecided evolution towards the Lycanthrope as well.

The sword training was easy. His Weapon Mastery was now at the level of a 'High Class User', so there weren't too many Knights who could contend with him on that regard.

Every Knight praised Sae-Jin for being a genius with the sword, even saying things like he'd have been the world's greatest swordsman if he was born in the middle ages or something.

Even learning 'martial arts' for the first time in his life proved to be easier than expected as well. The 'Warrior's Special Quality' had gifted him with instincts on how to move his body efficiently; many martial art techniques such as breaking the fall, feet movement, hand to hand combat, etc, etc., were deeply ingrained within his body already.

As far as his physical body was concerned, it was pretty much perfect, leaving Mana as his only problem to tackle.

It was incredibly important to start the education on how to use

Mana very early in one's life. No matter how much potential one had, 'they' said that if the 'golden time' of around 5~6 years of age was missed, that person would never ever be able to store Mana in his or her body – so, for someone like Sae-Jin who was in his 20s already, the concept of him storing Mana within his body was a hugely difficult prospect, even if he cheated a little with his Trait sometimes.

The idea was as impossible as trying to grasp a passing cloud, and just as ambiguous and intangible as the fading morning fog.

So, in order to overcome this shortcoming of his, he asked Hazeline for a favour, who just so happened to be an A-ranked Wizard in her spare time. With her readily agreeing to it, a new schedule for 'Mana Tutelage' was set up, the lessons happening on every second week of a month on the days of Friday and Saturday.

"Close your eyes, and try to receive Mana into your body. Shuwook-Shuwook-"

Inside the members-only training area.

While sitting in the lotus position, Sae-Jin's eyes were closed as he repeatedly breathed in and out deeply.

This was a part of the Mana-related lessons, focusing on increasing the amount of usable Mana in him.

"Shuwook-Shuwook-"

"Please continue 'shuwook, shuwook' repeatedly."

"...Will this really work?"

Unfortunately, Sae-Jin's suspicions remained unanswered. He had been doing nothing but shuwooking, shuwooking for the past 30 minutes, after all.

"Just as do as you're told, please. This is a test to see how good your affinity with Mana is."

Too bad for him, Hazeline was adamant with her orders.

"...Really? If that's the case, then... Shuwook~, shuwook."

Sae-Jin resumed this sort-of-but-not-really meditation technique slash breathing thing.

And so, he repeated this for countless dozens of times until Hazeline lightly tapped on his shoulder to signal the end of the exercise.

"That's enough. The concentration level of Mana in your breaths is equivalent to that of a low Mid Tier Knight."

"Huh?"

He momentarily got shocked. Even if he knew that the Stat values for the Magic Strength and Mana Affinity were inferior to his Physical strength-related Stats, wasn't this unexpectedly low? He honestly thought it was at least at the level of a Mid Tier...

"...What's up with that expression? A High Tier Hunter would never possess the equivalent Mana level of a Low Tier Knight no matter how hard he tries. In other words, it's already very impressive that your level approaches that of a low Mid Tier Knight. Well then, shall we start with the real training now?"

As soon as Hazeline finished speaking, she activated a spell even before Sae-Jin had gotten ready.

"@#\$%?!?!" (Kim Sae-Jin)

In the blink of an eye, an overbearing current of Mana was generated, and began powerfully pushing down on Sae-Jin's seated body.

"Perform push-ups under this pressure, please. I know it's tough, but it can't be helped, you know? After all, this is the only method left for someone like Mister Sae-Jin, who has missed his ideal time for Mana training by a span of decades, to increase his overall Mana capacity, even if it's only by a little."

When Sae-Jin could only whimper under the pressure, unable to

reply back, she withdrew the Mana pressing down on him – at least for now.

"Please listen well. The concentration level of Mana in here is very high because of the Athany doll and a Mana Spring, right? And I'll be compressing the Mana in the air and press it down on you. So, even if it's for a short while, doesn't that mean that you, Mister Sae-Jin, will be receiving the 'love' of Mana present in the air with all of your body, no?"

Hazeline brightly smiled and swung her arms around in circles. Since that looked like her loosening up before activating her spell again, Sae-Jin became tense once more.

"And when you sweat during an exercise while being subjected under this kind of situation, your sweat pores will open up wide and through those open pores, Mana will enter your body. It'll also become easier to absorb Mana when muscles are working, too. Of course, 99% of the Mana will leave your body again, but still, your Mana reserve should increase this way even if it would only be a little bit. So now, please take off your clothes."

"Eh? Why... my clothes?"

Seeing Sae-Jin covering up his chest by crossing his arms and pretending to be embarrassed, Hazeline frowned deeply.

"Please stop fooling around. It'll be easier to absorb Mana with less layering of clothing, you see. You also know that air can't easily pass through fabrics. There's a big difference."

"...Well, I get that, but..."

"Please hurry up. I'll get angry if you don't listen to the teacher, you know? I came here after answering Mister Sae-Jin's earnest plea, but it'll become troublesome if you're being uncooperative. I mean, do you have any idea how much is the fee for a tutelage by an A-ranked Wizard?"

Hearing all this, Sae-Jin carried a complicated expression as he

began unzipping his top.

- "...Even my pants?"
- "...I'll let you keep that on, so for now, take off your T-shirt as well."

He really did feel somewhat embarrassed, but he removed the shirt in the end. His battle-hardened, perfectly shaped and tight muscles revealed themselves in all their glory.

"...Hmm. Hm, hmm..."

Hazeline's cheeks slightly reddened as she took in the sight of his broad shoulders, well-built chest, clearly-defined eight pack, and the lower abdominal muscles.

"M, must be thanks to your Trait, since your body looks nice."

Although she tried to sound normal, in all honesty, his body was already well past the level of being 'nice'.

By using her Trait called 'Eyes of the Wizard', she could easily tell. As exactly as these words meant, Sae-Jin's body was as close to as being perfect as possible, something not even Knights training for the rest of their lives might achieve.

Although the amount of Mana circulating within his body was low, the 'quality' of it was very high.

"...Keum." (Kim Sae-Jin)

"What are you doing? Why aren't you getting ready?"

The embarrassed Sae-Jin hurriedly got down to the push-up position as soon as she spoke. When he did, those already well-defined muscles on his shoulders and that broad back stood out even more.

Hazeline tried her best to avert her gaze, but because she was still a member of the female species, she couldn't completely prevent her eyes from taking several quick glances. "...I'm activating the spell. Please, try you best."

"Yes... @#\$%!!"

Again, before he got properly ready, an overwhelming atmospheric pressure pressed down on his back. However, he still began the push-up while gritting his teeth. Only ten seconds had passed by, but his arms and legs were already shaking around like leaves and sweat drops were pouring down like a waterfall.

"One." (Hazeline)

Hazeline counted for him, but it didn't enter his ears. Whether this was his first or second, he couldn't tell, nor did he wanted to know.

"This... f***ing..."

The only words leaking out of his mouth were nothing but curses.

"Stop cursing."

"Kkeuck..."

After hearing him swear out, Hazeline actually increased the severity of the spell.

"Now then. Let's do the second one, shall we? But when can you do it? Do I have to wait for an hour?"

"...Kkeu, euh euh..."

While hearing her ridicule, Sae-Jin continued to exert all of his strength.

*

['Magic Strength' has increased by 2. 'Mana Affinity' has increased by 1.]

This was the result of today's training.

Kim Sae-Jin smiled brightly as he lay on the floor, roughly huffing and puffing. It was seriously a wonderful result. After all,

this much increase was equal to absorbing dozens of Mid Tier Mana Stones. It was the right decision to ask for Hazeline's aid.

""

However, the actual person who helped him achieve this growth, Hazeline, was carrying quite a complicated expression. She wasn't sure how, but the amount of Mana now staying in his body easily exceeded her initial estimates.

In truth, this was an inefficient method that had a clear dead end. To use an analogy of a person's height, it was similar to trying to locate the 'hidden height' by correcting the bone structure of a person who had already stopped growing. (TL: Really? Such a thing exists? Where do I sign up?)

"...But seriously, just what kind of a body is this greedy for Mana?!"

Normally, about 50% of the Mana existing in the air would enter a person's body. But then, 99% of that would escape back out so, theoretically, only around 0.5% should remain inside that person's body.

But when peeking into Sae-Jin's body, over 25% of the Mana entering his body remained behind. No, it was more like being 'captured' – by the Mana already existing within his body.

'Is it also because of his Trait?' (Hazeline)

She couldn't get a bead on just what kind of Trait he had. If Mana continued to remain in his body without limit, then within a year, he'd even leapfrog her in terms of overall Mana reserve...

"...Mister Sae-Jin. Is your body feeling okay?"

"Ah, yes, of course. Miss Teacher."

"The results are pretty good, right? Well then... can you stand? Why don't we go and eat something?"

Hazeline smiled bitterly as she offered her hand. Feeling

satisfied, Sae-Jin was about to grab the offered hand.

But then...

"Oppa, are you he...?"

Yu Sae-Jung arrived at the training facility with a spooky good timing.

She began alternating her gaze between Sae-Jin who was covered in buckets of sweat, and a surprised woman who was hurriedly pulling the robe to hide her face.

"....Uhm... You came early today?"

There was still an hour left until their promised time...

Kim Sae-Jin picked up his article of clothing and began putting them on, all the while looking at Yu Sae-Jung with a slightly stupefied expression.

*

"The tracing is complete, sir. The current location of the artificial heart is inside the city near the Monster field in Gangwon Province, within the grounds of 'The Monster'."

"...How troublesome. Does the Society Chairman, who is supposedly in cahoots with the Lycan, have the heart?"

The Apostle Beren let out a frustrated groan after hearing the subordinate's report.

"We're not sure of that, sir, but the likelihood of that is very high."

Beren roughly massaged his temples. To think, the item they had to recover at any cost was unexpectedly in the hands of a big fish...

"...What are your orders, sir?"

The 'friend' of Lycan. His job description, 'Chairman' of the Society, The Monster – this man named Kim Sae-Jin was an important enough individual that even made the Apostle of the

House of Bathory hesitate.

"For now... keep him under surveillance. It's possible that the Lycan is protecting him, so use pawns for this purpose."

"Yes, sir. I understand."

The short answer from the subordinate echoed in the empty room.

< 24. Calm Before the Storm (3) > Fin.

Chapter 84: Intensification (1)

" "

Yu Sae-Jung continued to move her gaze between Kim Sae-Jin and the unknown woman. Within her trembling eyes, many emotions such as fear, anger, irritation, anxiety, dumbfoundedness, etc. etc., tumbled around in a wild mess.

Sae-Jin hurriedly put his clothes back on and walked towards her.

"...Hey, you should greet her. This is..."

He paused his words there. He wanted to acquire Hazeline's permission first.

"It's fine."

Hazeline nodded her head firmly.

"Wha, what's fine?"

Unfortunately for Yu Sae-Jung, this entire situation was just a big messy ball of confusion. Just what kind of introductions would require an okay from the other party first...? She knew she was worrying about nothing here, but still, she couldn't help but feel nervous.

"So, the thing is, this person is..."

"No, wait!! Stop, stop right there!!!!!" (Yu Sae-Jung)

Yu Sae-Jung shouted out and stopped Sae-Jin. She felt like she needed time to ready her mind, if it was to calm her erratically beating heart...

"...This person is Miss Hazeline. You also know her too." (Sae-Jin)

Good thing, then, Sae-Jin didn't feel like extending the duration of her misunderstanding.

Yu Sae-Jung's body trembled for an imperceptible amount of time, before she began remembering the name Hazeline – only then did she let out a sigh of relief as she nodded her head.

"Oh. Wowee.... Yes, of course, I know. I know well..."

Her eyes that were shaking in anxiety had now recovered some stability.

Sae-Jin chuckled slightly, and then said...

"She's our fellow Society member, so isn't it okay?"

...While gently gazing at Hazeline with an amiable smile.

"...Well. I've made many written communications with Miss Sae-Jung, so..."

Hazeline nodded her head in reluctance before removing her hood. Yu Sae-Jung became incredibly stunned, then. As expected of an Elf, her face was eye-searingly beautiful – but her skin was pure white, unlike how a Dark Elf should be. Before such an absolute beauty, Sae-Jung found herself shrinking away in awe.

"It's our first time meeting face to face, yes? It's a pleasure, Miss Sae-Jung."

Hazeline reached out with her hand for a shake. Feeling slightly inferior, Sae-Jung carefully held that hand.

"...As expected, your beauty is befitting that of an Elf." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Receiving that bitter praise, Hazeline assumed a wry smile as well.

"I was training until now. Miss Hazeline decided to help me out."

Kim Sae-Jin didn't like the depressed expression of Yu Sae-Jung, so he deliberately placed his arm around her shoulders and gently pulled her in closer.

It was definitely 'gently'.

But Yu Sae-Jung dived into his arms as if she was being shoved by a tornado or something.

"...Y, you two seem really friendly."

At this sudden embracing, Hazeline became flustered and scratched the back of her neck.

"Ah, that... Actually, we're really, really close. And there's a plenty of future potential for us t..." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Kim Sae-Jin quickly covered up her mouth, after realising she was saying weird stuff that was obviously trying to ward Hazeline off of him.

"...Our relationship is like that of a friendly older brother and younger sister." (Kim Sae-Jin)

Meanwhile, Yu Sae-Jung bit into his palm in irritation.

*

[The Orc Blacksmith, now registered as the 18th Master Craftsman of South Korea.]

[A genius who has become a Master only after debuting 2 years ago; many overseas Knights Orders send their congratulations.]

[The weapon that has elevated the Orc as the Master, will be auctioned off on June 1st in Hyunwol Auction House. Total of 200 Knights Orders from over 100 countries request for the participation of the auction....]

"How chaotic."

Smiling in satisfaction, Sae-Jin lowered the newspaper on top of the desk. Newspapers from not only Korea, but also from Spain, the USA, the UK, China, Japan as well as countless other countries could be found on top of his desk.

The languages might be different, but their headlines were remarkably similar. All of them were about the Orc Blacksmith becoming a Master Craftsman, and the words printed within were busy expressing their curiosity towards the 'Treasure' graded weapon he had crafted.

...At least, that's according to Soh Yeo-Jin, who happened to be quite proficient in several languages.

"Yes sir, it is getting really hectic out there. We even received official diplomatic documentation from several Asian and Western European countries for their Prime Ministers and Presidents who are planning to attend the auction itself."

"Really? That's amazing."

"Well, since it's a Treasure-graded item we are talking about, I think this is only normal, sir. I mean, it's a first one to appear in Korea for over 30 years, you know? He must be a true genius, this Mister Orc Blacksmith."

Kim Sae-Jin did his best to stop his shoulders from straightening out after hearing Soh Yeo-Jin's praises.

"Keum... That's how it is?"

"But of course~."

Just as Soh Yeo-Jin smiled brightly and nodded her head, the voice of his PA leaked out of the Society Chairman-exclusive phoneline.

– Mister Chairman. Miss Shenarine the Wizard has called in to say that she'll be arriving on the premises shortly.

"Oh. Looks like it's time for your training. Then, I should return to my duties as well~." (Soh Yeo-Jin)

Soh Yeo-Jin grinned brightly and left his office. Sae-Jin yawned and stretched his limbs out wide, before he got up from his seat as well.

*

Before going to the training facility, he stopped by the Society's members-only cafeteria. Maybe it was because this was during lunch time, there were quite a few people here.

Kim Yu-Sohn's son, Kim Seon-Ho, was carefully feeding his young daughter some baby food, while Yi Hye-Rin was looking at that scene with adoring eyes. Joo Ji-Hyuk was deeply immersed in the novel he was reading, while Yu Sae-Jung was busy typing on the keyboard of a notebook PC while wearing a pair of glasses.

'She said it was a group project for school, so it must be a lot of work.'

Everyone looked occupied with something. And out of them, the only one remaining with some leeway who could lessen his boredom was...

"I see that you've come again." (Sae-Jin)

"Hmm? Ah, yes. Hye-Rin asked me to come along, so I, uh... ended up relying on you again. The food tastes really nice here, which is as expected."

...That person was Kim Yu-Rin, who was already halfway to the dreamland before he interrupted her nap time.

"Well, it's true that our cafeteria is famous for its delicious food."

After all, Sae-Jin only hired those chefs with great potential, so it was par for the course, really.

"...Of course."

Kim Yu-Rin subtly tried to read Sae-Jin's mood while avoiding making a direct eye contact. Maybe because she knew that she was not the member of his Society.

"It's fine. You don't have to be so tense like that. You are contracted with the Monster Entertainment, so you can come as often as you'd like." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin assumed a wily smile after sitting down before her.

"Oh... Thank you. So, will it be alright for me to trouble you in the future as well?"

"Mm? Oh, of course."

He figured that she was referring to the Society's training facility. He had witnessed Yu-Rin loitering out in front of the HQ building more than once, whenever her acquaintances – Yi Hye-Rin or Yu Sae-Jung – weren't around.

"...By the way..."

Kim Sae-Jin took a glance at the wrist protector mounted Yu-Rin's arm. She saw the direction of his gaze and slowly hid the arm below the table.

"So, that's 'that thing'? The one given by the Hero Orc."

"...Did Hye-Rin tell you about it?"

"She did."

Kim Yu-Rin let out a lengthy groan.

"...Yes, the Hero Orc gave it to me."

"May I touch it?"

Sae-Jin reached out with his hand while speaking to her. However, Kim Yu-Rin promptly and swiftly turned away to the other side and shook her head slowly.

"Nope."

"...You like that Orc that much?"

"T, that's not true!! Not true at all!! It's just... a present, is all. You are not supposed to touch someone else's gifts willy-nilly."

"Hmm..."

Sae-Jin stared at her and feigned dissatisfaction for a bit, while rubbing his chin. Then, a very good idea popped up in his head.

"...Do you want me to help you and set up a meeting with him?"

At his truly unexpected question, her eyes became super wide.

"Eh? W, what are you saying...?"

"It's just as I said. I told you that I can 'converse' with Monsters. That's how I got to be friendly with the Hero Orc..."

When he spoke up to here, he could see Kim Yu-Rin visibly swallow down her saliva.

"But well, just because I make a request, that doesn't mean it'll happen... but surely, the possibility should be high?"

Of course, there would be a catch.

"If Miss Yu-Rin joins my Society, then maybe, just maybe...
Maybe I can summon forth the Hero Orc at least once every couple of weeks..."

Kim Sae-Jin smiled evilly as he studied reactions in Yu-Rin's eyes.

And they were shaking uncontrollably.

However...

"...I can't. And I shall repeat this point once more. I'm not feeling any affection towards the Orc. If anything, then it's simply the emotion of camaraderie between comrades who had battled together. After all, does the notion of a human liking a Monster even make sense?"

She continued to strongly deny everything.

"...Yes, I understand. Well... if you change your mind later on, let me know, please."

She was like an impregnable fortress. Feeling his stubbornness act up, he even thought up some really naughty things, such as appearing before her as the Orc and fan the flames of yearning in her heart or something.

Right then, his phone rang loudly.

It was from Hazeline.

Suddenly remembering the complicated history between Yu-Rin

and Hazline, Sae-Jin carefully exited the cafeteria.

But before that...

"Miss Yu-Rin, since you refused to join my Society, you are forbidden from entering the training facility today. No ifs or buts, please."

"Huh?! No, wait, I didn't come to train... I understand..."

*

'...Don't wanna help him anymore.'

Hazeline pouted as she looked at the training Kim Sae-Jin who was exercising like there's no tomorrow.

In all honesty, she didn't want to help him. Of course, she was very much grateful for what this man, Kim Sae-Jin aka the Goblin Alchemist had done to make her a real, super important big shot in the world of Alchemy. It was hard to quantify just how grateful she was.

However, she couldn't help but feel intense jealousy at this unfair situation. It truly was a deplorable behaviour, but what could she do?

Wizards were originally the type of 'animals' that were full of petty jealousy, envy, ostracisation of others better than him or her, as well as desires to monopolise. On top of this, the level of pride they had in their reserve of Mana was on another plateau altogether.

And not to forget, although she had taken half a step away from that profession, Hazeline was still a Wizard, through and through.

She had never ever even heard of, or experienced, such a wondrous growth potential before. Her Mana reserves increased only after she had to go through training that literally made her sweat blood drops, until her bones felt like they were breaking under the strain.

But this man, in probably over a year's time... no, maybe even less than that. In half a year's time, she estimated that this man would possess more Mana than her if this rate kept up.

It was the difference of such a fraudulently unfair talent, or his Trait, and herself.

"Huu-Euph!!"

However, Sae-Jin was totally oblivious to her uncomfortable state of mind and concentrated solely on his training. At first, it was seriously tough, but now that a month had passed by, it had gotten much easier. The refreshing sensation of Mana permeating throughout his body was more than enough to offset the pain from the harsh training.

'This just doesn't make sense. How can the rate of his increase in Mana absorption actually be higher than last week?!' (Hazeline)

Normally, when a person absorbed a certain amount of Mana during a day, he or she'd be able to absorb just a bit less on the following day – because the space in one's body to store up Mana was limited. But it was not the same with this man.

Her face became nearly tearful after wondering why he was the only exception to this rule.

"...So, uh, shall we stop here for today?"

Hazeline stomped her feet on the ground in vexation and spoke to him.

"No way... I can... push myself... a bit more..."

He gritted his teeth and succeeded in doing one more push up.

""

Hazeline shut her mouth in anger. Meanwhile...

['Magic Strength' has increased by 2. 'Mana Affinity' has increased by 1.]

...Only when alert windows such as this one floated up to his view a couple more times did he stop his training while feeling rather satisfied by the result.

*

The training lasted for three hours. During that time, Yu Sae-Jung went home after saying she needed to get ready for the following day's 'presentation', while Joo Ji-Hyuk went out on a date with Yi Hye-Rin.

"Let me take you home."

Currently, they were in the parking lot. Sae-Jin opened the car's door as he spoke.

"Hmm... Alright."

Hazeline deliberated for a bit before nodding her head. She figured that it was better to get a free ride home, since she felt a bit light-headed from helping him out in his training – although it looked simple from outside, it nevertheless required a good deal of Mana from her.

"Please get in." (Sae-Jin)

Hazeline climbed into the passenger side, and Sae-Jin got behind the wheel.

As they drove, they talked about this and that. Most of them were about Yu Sae-Jung and The Monster, though.

"Miss Sae-Jung, she's really cute, isn't she? She's been messaging me all the time, asking me what I've been doing lately, and then, just drops out of the conversation for no reason. So, I thought about this for a while, trying to figure out what she wants. And I think she's trying to warn me off you."

"She's doing what?"

"Well, whenever she can't contact you, it's like, she's thinking that maybe you're spending time with me instead, so she's sending those text messages to probe me."

Kim Sae-Jin shook his head wryly.

"Eiii, no way."

"Eiii? It's the truth, you know? You know what's the first thing written on her texts? 'Unni, what are you doing right now?' Or, it's 'Are you meeting someone right now?' It freaks me out sometimes... So, please treat her a little bit better. She seems to like you really a lot."

Just as when Sae-Jin glanced over at her direction with a smile...

The Wolf's intuition ran an alarm bell immediately.

In an instant, his perception of time slowed down, and the world began flowing much more slowly.

A formless matter was suddenly crashing into the side of his car. He couldn't tell what it was, whether it was a magic spell, pure Mana, or even an Undead. Kim Sae-Jin slammed down on the brakes and then, he pulled Hazeline into his arms in haste.

Within this slowed perspective of time, he could clearly decipher every little bit of changes in her expressions.

It sure was fun to look at, but he couldn't focus on that right now.

He quickly extracted Mana from his body, and then formed a thin membrane from it which wrapped around them. As soon as the blue and circular membrane finished forming...

Right then.

With a violent impact, the car was flung high into the air. And on top of the airborne vehicle, enormous 'darkness' poured down.

*

"...Are you unhurt?"

Inside the blue-coloured Mana membrane, Sae-Jin lightly

grasped her shoulders and shook her. Frowning heavily, she massaged the back of her neck while slowly nodding.

"I'm more or less okay, but which sons of f***ing b***hes did this?"

""

Sae-Jin became speechless after hearing her rough words.

Just in time, they could hear the footsteps just beyond the Mana membrane.

"They're coming." (Hazeline)

Hazeline angrily gritted her teeth and began summoning Mana from her body.

"Hey, can you do something about this?" (Hazeline)

She then asked Sae-Jin while tapping his Mana membrane.

"...Oh. Please wait a moment."

Since Sae-Jin had never seen her this furious before, he went into maximum respect mode and politely opened up a hole in the membrane for her.

The first thing they saw was the violently twisted wreckage of the car's chassis.

"---."

Hazeline closed her eyes and recited an unidentifiable chant.

Ttaaaaaaaang!!!!

Right away, an enormous thrust of air exploded out through the open gap of the membrane and flung away the car's chassis.

"It's done. Undo the whole thing."

"Ah, yes."

As he undid the membrane, Hazeline let out a low sigh as she exited out of the partial destroyed car.

"...Come out. Who are you? Show yourselves right now, or I'll burn you alive."

Hazeline's cold voice resounded from the middle of the empty road.

As if reacting to her provocation, a figure of a person emerged from the darkness that had descended in front of the car.

"Hey you, you must be out of your mind. Don't you think this is too much for a pran..." (Hazeline)

But it wasn't just one person. Two, three, four, five, six.... until there were eight of them. With the sudden entrance of these eight mysterious beings, Hazeline became slightly more serious as she licked her lips.

"... So, you came prepared. Who sent you? Did the Triads send you?" (Hazeline)

It seemed that she was seriously mistaken about something.

- "...From the Mafia? Right. I thought as much." (Hazeline)
- < 25. Intensification (1) > Fin.

Chapter 85: Intensification (2)

Kim Sae-Jin slowly approached the back of Hazeline who was busy glaring at the nine humanoid figures covered in a veil of darkness, her current face stiff. Sensing his approach, she extended her arm out and stopped him there.

"...I'm sorry, Mister Sae-Jin. This is all because of me. I'll finish this up as soon as possible, so please, take a step back."

"No, wait a min..."

"Hush. Be quiet now."

Her misunderstanding continued on as she began drawing deep breaths.

"Since you didn't react, I guess you're not from the Mafia, either? Then, maybe you're from Yakuza?" (Hazeline)

There was no reply this time as well. It was obvious why – they were not 'human' to begin with. Their rotten smell of blood tickling Sae-Jin's nostrils proved that much.

"

Without replying back to her, all nine of them began chanting a spell at the same time. Seeing this, Hazeline bit her lip and then, chanted her own spell as well.

Right away, black-coloured lava powerfully rose up behind her, before forming a massive, lengthy spear that buzzed noisily while floating in the air. Near the constantly burning surface of the spear, space seemed to distort around as the air itself was busy melting all around it.

It was the Mana Spear.

The spell where its caster formed a spear with Mana, its sole purpose was to destroy and kill its target. Rated as one of the highest-class attack magic spells, not only the caster needed to pour in a great deal of Mana, he or she also needed to possess excellent Magic Strength – ability to control Mana – in order to maintain the shape of the spear as well as its elemental properties.

This spell was powerful enough to be used as the greatest trump card that could theoretically contend against a true dragon, depending on the ability of the caster.

"If you're scared, then you better get lost now. I do not wish to worsen our relationship any further than it already is. If we can resolve this with dialogue, wouldn't it be simpler for both of us that way?"

Hazeline confidently grinned, as the Mana Spear split into nine and targeted all nine figures while buzzing in the air.

That grin could last only for 10 seconds.

The reason for that was the strange 'wave' spreading out from beneath the feet of the Vampires. Spreading around like a raging black torrent, this wave thing reached out until arriving at a certain diameter, then rose up in a dome shape, separating and enclosing the space they were in from the rest of the world.

This was a spell Sae-Jin was quite familiar with: the isolation barrier.

"...Huh?!" (Hazeline)

Of course, as an A-ranked Wizard, Hazeline had experienced her share of barriers before. But at this moment, she could not hide her astonishment.

As soon as this barrier finished forming, the sizes of the black Mana Spears began to gradually shrink rapidly, all the while she felt the flow of Mana within her body slow down as well.

At this unexpected turn of events, she quickly scanned her surroundings and gritted her teeth.

"What kind of trickery is this?!"

Vampires didn't bother to answer her, even this time. Instead, from behind their back, a small and dark-reddish rift in the space opened up; from there, dozens of tentacles exploded out. These things slapped away the Mana Spears and flung themselves at Hazeline's location.

Right in that moment when those grotesque-looking tentacles and their sharp edges were about to cut into her neck...

Five lines of slashes, coming from unexpected 'claws', gleamed coldly in the air as the tentacles were sliced apart, turning to powder before dissipating into the wind.

Only then did the nine Vampires show some signs of being agitated.

"This f***ing.... Pant, pant..." (Hazeline)

Sensing the approach of death for the first time after a long, long while, Hazeline broke out in cold sweat, her breathing ragged and shallow.

"These crazy sons of b^{***} hes have gone completely bonkers insane. Resorting to using sh^* tty black magic... huh?"

Hazeline began pointing accusatory fingers at the Vampires while growling like a wounded animal, only to have a strong hand powerfully rein her back in from behind.

"...Miss Hazeline. Please calm down first. We are at a disadvantage here. Do you know of the ways to disable a barrier like this?"

Sae-Jin looked at her with a hardened face. Sensing the overall strengths of the nine suddenly-appearing Vampires via the Wolf's intuition, he couldn't help but feel flustered here. In the Human Form, there was just no way he'd be able to fight against all of them at the same time.

"I've never seen a barrier like this before. It must be from the school of black magic, but... I'm truly sorry. Because of me, even Mister Sae-Jin has..."

Hazeline's misunderstanding hadn't alleviated just yet, and thus she was feeling apologetic towards Sae-Jin as a result. Seeing her like this, some of the tension in him lightened up, causing him to smile weakly and nod his head.

"It's fine. I'll do my best to buy us time, so please, look for a way to..."

Unfortunately for the two, these Vampires weren't polite enough to give them time to formulate a response.

Truly out of the blue, a giant meteorite formed on the skies within the barrier and began descending down rapidly on Sae-Jin and Hazeline. She summoned forth a barrier of her own with what little Mana she could wield, while he lengthened his claws and slashed out a whirlwind.

That's how they managed to stop the meteorite, but then, an unsighted tentacle shot towards them from the side. This thing easily smashed apart the barrier and inflicted a huge wound on Hazeline's waist.

"Kkeuck!!"

Hazeline stumbled and collapsed on the ground. Sae-Jin spat out a bunch of expletives and tried to cut the isolation barrier with his claws, but as expected, his actions proved to be ineffective.

'I can't do this as a human..."

Sighing out grandly, Sae-Jin extracted one of the Spiritualised potions out from his body and healed Hazeline's wound.

"...Euh euh..."

"Miss Hazeline, are you alright?"

Then, he studied Hazeline's face; she seemed rather relieved as the searing pain lessened a great deal.

"More or less..." (Hazeline)

"Please listen to me carefully. Me, I'm definitely not a Monster Man, nor a Demonic Being. If it's you, Miss Hazeline, you will trust me on this one, right?"

A Monster that could change into a person, the so-called Monster Man.

The being straddling the boundary between a human and a Monster, the Demonic Being.

Of the two, 'Demonic Being' actually was a collective term denoting all the races with violent nature and tendencies who had migrated from another world to planet Earth. These Demonic Beings were different from Vampires and Nagas in that, not one media outlet 'stood up' for them, and thus were now classified as targets to be eliminated on sight.

If Lycanthropes still existed, then they would surely fall into this category as well.

This was one of the reasons why Sae-Jin hesitated revealing his Trait to the others. After all, Demonic Beings who died while claiming to be humans holding unique Traits numbered quite a few.

"...?? What do you mean by..." (Hazeline)

In the middle of her sentence, Vampires attacked again. Sae-Jin managed to destroy the tentacles with his razor-sharp claws, but against the huge ball of black flames flying towards them, these claws weren't much of a help while he was in the Human Form.

"Kkyaahk!!"

Sae-Jin hurriedly pushed Hazeline with his arm and then flung himself to the opposite side.

Kwaaahang!!

The ground they were standing on mere seconds ago was distorted as if lava had melted it down.

"For now, search for a method to break out of this isolation barrier!!" (Sae-Jin)

He never once believed that he'd be able to conceal his Trait forever.

Sae-Jin shouted out at her, and then – assumed the form of the Hero Orc covered in blue scales.

The physique that easily exceeded the height of two metres; with the pair of burning eyes, he glared at the Vampires and grasped the mace tightly.

Within him, his fighting spirit, combined with rage boiled over.

SFX for an Orc's roar

That was why he just had to let out the roar containing all his hunger for battle. Although Hazeline was busy backpedalling in sheer fright, right now he had no interest in her plight whatsoever.

He then rushed forward, slamming away the various tentacles that were coiling out of pretty much everywhere, while completely ignoring those magic spells that were powerful enough to tickle him. The damage inflicted on the Orc's pristine scales were pretty much zero. His overwhelming appearance easily transcended that of a mere Orc, reminding all present of a mythical demonic fiend, instead.

"What the f***...?!"

The Vampires finally lost their calmness and began falling into disorder and one even spat out some choice words.

"———!!!"

With a roar that threatened to destroy the eardrums of all who listened to it, the Orc slammed down with his mace. As soon as the weapon slammed on the surface of the road, the ground gouged out in a crater, and the entire isolation barrier began to quake uncontrollably.

Seven out of the nine Vampires began panicking and started firing all sorts of magic spells to stop the rampaging Orc at all costs. However, the remaining two Vampires continued to maintain their composure. These so-called 'Honorable Apostles' then raised a wall between their group and the Orc, while speaking out words of calm.

"Stop wasting your energy and time. We'll activate the summoning procedure."

"...But?!"

When the seven 'Believers' were about to show their astonishment, the mace of the Orc powerfully slammed into the artificial wall with a loud Thaaahang and sent out a stupendous shock wave.

"That's probably his so-called 'Trait', no? Well, how unexpected and irritating. Begin the summoning procedure, immediately!"

"But, but, if we summon Lady Bathory here..."

"Mm? You think I'm insane? There's no need to summon her Majesty here. The Death Knight will be more than enough."

Kwaaahang!!

The mace slammed into the wall once more. Cracks noisily formed on the magically created defensive wall.

"Hurry. There's not much time."

Sensing the urgency of the situation, the nine Vampires hurriedly began reciting the chant together. The language they spoke was not Korean, not English, not even Japanese, but that of another world.

Sae-Jin's intuition immediately told him of the impending crisis, so he activated the Skill 'Warrior of Reversal' and attacked the magic wall even harder. Unfortunately, although the crack opened up just a bit wider, the defensive wall stood.

"Step aside for a second, please!!"

It was then, he heard Hazeline's shout along with the sensation of magic energy from the back. As soon as Sae-Jin stepped aside, very, very thin Mana Spear shot past him. It slipped in through the crack and splendidly set a Vampire's neck ablaze.

"Kkheurk!!"

At this sudden and successful attack, one of the Vampires met with an untimely death. However, it was still a bit too late. From the ground dyed in the darkest shades of black, the shape of an ebony knight slowly emerged above the surface.

This was a relic of the past, straight from the Vampires' previous world.

The strongest Undead, created out of a Knight who had passed on a long time ago – the Death Knight.

SFX for sounds of glass (?) shattering

As the Death Knight finished emerging, the defensive wall shattered like glass and Sae-Jin swung his mace against the still-immobile Death Knight. Too bad for him, though – those damnable tentacles got in the way of his attack and he had no choice but to retreat.

"You, find how to destroy, this barrier yet?" (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin shouted out. It was quite likely that if he started pounding on it, the barrier could collapse just like before. But there just wasn't enough time for that.

"I'm still looking!"

As Hazeline shouted back, the Death Knight completely awakened. From the gaps of the metal helm that hid its entire head, a pair of eerie red eyes lit up.

As soon as its consciousness returned in full, the Death Knight unsheathed the sword mounted on its hip and slashed out. The deep red sword aura flying out in a crescent trajectory was roughly slapped away by Sae-Jin's mace as he dashed towards the Death Knight.

Kwaaahahng!!

The Orc's mace shattered the air as it came down on the Death Knight's head, but it swung its great sword to block the attack. In that instant, a powerful shock wave swept out and raised a huge dust cloud that blocked the view.

Clang-Clang-

From within this thick dust cloud, the sounds of metal colliding against one another rang out continuously.

In terms of both the raw strength and skill, the Death Knight was not at disadvantage at all compared to Sae-Jin in the Orc Form. On top of this, the irritating obstruction from the surrounding Vampires were making this battle quite difficult as well.'

It was nearly impossible to defend against both the Death Knight's sword and the magic spells of the Vampires at the same time. So, Sae-Jin tried to focus on this Death Knight and let the other attacks slip by for now, but the d**n Undead's swordsmanship was like an impregnable fortress with absolutely no opening whatsoever.

"... This situation is too unfavourable."

Sae-Jin gritted his teeth as the sharp nicks began appearing on the tough scales covering his body.

In order to have a smoother battle, it was the correct strategy to kill off all the Wizards in the rear first who were in charge of supporting fire. Unfortunately for him, the current Orc Form was not agile enough to get past the Death Knight.

If he was in the Werewolf Form, it might just be possible, but he was certain that he'd not be able to withstand a single strike while transforming under this kind of intense situation.

66 2:

Sae-Jin glanced at the alert window faintly wavering just above the shoulders of the Death Knight. There was still one more method left that could potentially help him overcome this tricky situation.

[Will you evolve into the 'Lycanthrope'? :Yes/No]

That d**n alert window sure as hell looked incredibly alluring right about now. He thought that, whether there were pros and cons of becoming Lycanthrope or not, he had to actually survive in order to experience it.

"Any luck...?"

Sae-Jin shouted at Hazeline and glanced at her direction. But she was just as occupied as he was currently. Instead of searching for a way to break the isolation barrier, she was too busy engaging in a life-or-death battle against two Vampires.

"...F*ck."

If this unfavourable situation persisted, then both of them would perish here. There wasn't much time to decide anymore, and his reasoning of a Human was quickly deserting him. Seeing those damnable Vampires at the back busy shooting out those evil magic spells, his entire body quaked in violent rage, wishing nothing but to rip all their bodies asunder.

SFX for another loud Orcish roar

Sae-Jin roared out loudly and – selected 'Yes'.

In that moment, countless alert windows popped up. The windows seemed to fill up the entire the world and blocked his view completely. It was a scene he had never experienced before.

< 25. Intensification (2) > Fin.

Chapter 86: Intensification (3)

[The Ebony Wolf Form has now changed to: Lycanthrope Form.]

[All Stats rise drastically after the Human Form and the Lycanthrope Form merge.]

[A special Trait of the Lycanthrope, where it grows stronger the longer it is exposed to the moonlight, now applies.]

[When in the appearance of 'Wolf', the blood flow within the body will increase.]

[Proficiency for all existing Skills related to the 'Wolf' will rise up by a single Level.]

[A Passive Status Constraint, the 'Untied Knot' has been acquired.]

- After failing to suppress the wild instincts of the Lycanthrope, the host must assume the appearance of the 'Lycan (Wolf)' for (570) minutes every day, determined by the value of the Stat: Energy Manipulation.
- Until the conditions: (?????), are fulfilled, certain abilities of the Lycanthrope will be locked and unavailable.

[A new Passive Skill: 'Moonlight Skin', has been acquired.]

[Proficiency Level: F]

- The skin of the Lycanthrope is on a different level compared to an ordinary wolf. Possessing higher resistance towards physical and magical attacks, and able to freely change its property, the host can reflect light in a certain way to hide his body. However, this part of the skill can not be utilised while in a human's appearance.

[A new Active Skill: 'Eyes of the Wild', has been acquired.]

[Proficiency Level: F]

– Eyes that can decipher the enemy's weakness. But now, with the eyes of the Lycanthrope, the Skill can cause effects of a 'curse', which can reveal the previously-undetected weakness of the enemy by spending Mana. However, in the appearance of the human, the Skill Level will be lowered by one.]

[A new Active Skill: 'Expansion', has been acquired.]

[Proficiency Level: F]

– The host can increase the overall size of the wolf's appearance, depending on the Skill Level.

[A new Active Skill: 'Claw Chain', has been acquired.]
[Proficiency Level: F]

- Strikes from the host's claws will change directions according to the his will and kill the target. However, in the appearance of the human, the Skill Level will be lowered by one.

[A new Passive Skill:...]

Sae-Jin's view was completely filled up with all these letters. There wasn't enough time to read every single one of them, but since he was sure of his strength increasing, he rapidly changed into the Lycanthrope.

Almost in an instant, silver fur began sprouting out of his body; the Orc had vanished and in its place, a humanoid wolf stood there instead.

Possessing fur and skin that seemed to have absorbed the pure moonlight, the Lycanthrope.

A being that should not have existed in this world – an extinct creature of legends and myths.

At this sudden entrance of a Lycanthrope, all the Vampires fell into a state of panic.

Even the Death Knight paused its actions briefly at this sudden turn of events. Its action came from the Undead possessing some consciousness, but that proved to be its biggest mistake. The 'Wolf' took this opening and kicked the ground, heading directly towards the Vampires.

It raised a tremendous sonic boom in its wake, which even forced the Death Knight to stumble on its feet. Arriving before the group of Vampires in a flash, the 'Wolf' swung its lengthy claw. The five arcs of horrifying slashes drawing in the air descended down and ripped a Vampire's chest wide open – and then, they snaked around before cutting down the second, and the third Vampire down.

And so, when the fourth Vampire got ruthlessly cut down—

The Death Knight quickly arrived, collided with claws of the 'Wolf' and blocked his advance.

Unfortunately for the Undead, the 'Wolf' found its sword swings incredibly slow.

He tilted his body slightly to the side to avoid the sword slash, and resumed moving towards another Vampire. The b*****d tried to hurriedly erect a magic shield of some sort, but under the barrage of claws, such magic was simply too inadequate.

SFX for blood raining down

The terrifying claws of the 'Wolf' easily passed through the shield and left a fatal wound on the Vampire's chest.

""

And the b*****d dropped dead, unable to even make a single cry.

All of this happened within the span of five seconds. The Lycanthrope had reaped the lives of five Vampires in the blink of an eye while not even leaving behind an afterimage.

The remaining Vampires got deeply frightened by the sight of the

Lycanthrope, their race's sworn enemy which they had never seen before until now, and tried to escape. Too bad, the isolation barrier they had set up earlier came back to bite them in the rear.

"Sir!! P, please, undo the barrier!!"

It was the moment when these Vampire bastards grandly fell into a trap they themselves had meticulously set up.

"Kkheuaaark!!!"

At the same time, a deep scarlet-coloured flame erupted from the side of the isolation barrier, accompanied by a pitiful scream.

Hazeline seized the opening created when the strength of the barrier weakened due to the deaths of the Vampires, and launched a spell, 'Hellfire', which resulted in the death of yet another bloodsucker.

"This damnable...!!"

In the end, the Apostle deactivated the barrier and tried to run.

Of course, Sae-Jin the Lycanthrope would not accept that.

Kwajeek!!

The moonlight-coloured wolf easily avoided the sword swings of the Death Knight with some deft evasive manoeuvres, approached next to the Apostle, and then, thrust his fangs towards the neck of the Vampire.

"...Sh*t!!"

The Apostle didn't lose his composure even while being under the attack of the wolf and fired off a beam of lightning towards Sae-Jin's opened maw, but the wolf lightly twisted his body. Instead of hitting the wide open mouth, the beam hit the shoulder – however, the Wolf's 'Moonlight Skin' could negate such a pitiful attack performed in a hurry with ease.

Ignoring the ineffective attack, the 'Wolf' successfully ripped the Apostle's neck to shreds. With his neck bone twisted around

unnaturally, the Apostle died in that instant, his body going limp.

The isolation barrier completely broke apart as soon as one of the two Apostles supporting it was killed off.

All that now remained were two Vampires and a Death Knight.

The 'Wolf' glanced at the remaining Vampires with its crimson eyes and licked its lips.

"T, this crazy, f***ing thing..."

They tried to invoke the Vampire's trademark reverse summoning magic to escape from this place.

However, the Lycanthrope's claws could not only render any magic ineffective, those could also cut away the flow of Mana as well.

The 'Wolf' slashed out towards the vivid strands of deep red Mana with his claws. In a blink of an eye, the Mana that was about to spirit away the remaining Vampires dissipated, and Hazeline fired off a huge Mana Spear towards the panicking bloodsucker.

The Apostle managed to slap away the Spear using one of those tentacles, but...

"...Oh. Sh*t."

...But, the brightly-burning Spear had divided into dozens, hundreds and covered up the entire night sky.

Following the Apostle's will, the Death Knight quickly change its target towards Hazeline, but it was blocked by Sae-Jin in his 'Wolf' form.

And then – hundreds of Mana Spears pierced into the remaining three enemies.

Ttukwahng!!!

A destructive explosion rang out.

A Wizard highly proficient in casting magic can accurately assign

the target that would bear all of the damage from the spell. That was how, Hazeline could turn the two Vampires to ash without damaging the road or the surroundings.

The last one remaining was the Death Knight.

Clang—!!

When the Death Knight's sword and Sae-Jin's claws clashed, a cold metallic sound resounded out alongside bright sparks that flew into the air.

"...Oh my. What is this? You're still alive? Mister Sae-Jin, please take of that knight for me." (Hazeline)

Hazeline was about to help Sae-Jin out, before she changed the direction of her gaze towards the Apostle who somehow managed to hold onto his life. It seemed that he had deployed a magic barrier or shield to its absolute maximum and was able to withstand the frightening explosion of Mana Spears, even if it was only by a little bit.

Staring back at the bloodied and mortally injured Apostle who was looking at her with hate-filled eyes, Hazeline began forming a chilling smile. It was as if she had found a nice little toy for herself.

"...Got it." (Sae-Jin)

After making a simple reply, Sae-Jin activated the new Skill, 'Eyes of the Wild' and glared at the Death Knight. Then, the whole world seemed to slow down to a crawl; the view became black and white, except for the small area near the right chest of the Death Knight which was dyed in red. He knew instinctively – that was this Undead's weak point.

Kwaaaahang!!

The Death Knight slashed down with its great sword. As soon as Sae-Jin took a few steps back to evade it, the place he was standing on just now became destroyed and sunk to the ground by that powerful attack.

'Looks like he was a pretty famous Knight back when...' (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin licked his lips. This Undead was proving to be a formidable foe. Even if he had located its weak spot, this thing's swordsmanship left no gap to exploit.

[Your Proficiency Level is too low!!]

And even though he tried to enlarge the weak spot, as his Skill Level was just too low, he could not affect the body of the Death Knight at all.

'If that's the case...'

He shifted his focus to the great sword swung towards his way. The weapon reflected within the Eyes of the Wild showed no weakness and was jet-black throughout.

However, at the very spot his eyes were focused on, right in the middle of the blade itself, a reddish blot began to form there.

With a wicked smile on his lips, Sae-Jin dodged the swinging sword and then, attacked the middle of the weapon with his claws.

SFX for something splitting apart

As per his expectations, a crack developed on the blade. The Death Knight stumbled back in confusion.

But the 'Wolf' knew no mercy.

He stepped forward explosively, and slashed out at the Death Knight's sword once more.

And so, it turned out that, without the sword, this Undead Knight was nothing more than a pretty mediocre fist fighter.

*

"...Mister Sae-Jin?"

After the battle had ended.

Hazeline cautiously called out to Sae-Jin who was busy rummaging through the dead bodies to procure the loot (?). But instead of a human's face, a Wolf stared back at her. Under the clear moonlight, his fur was shining but his breath was somewhat ragged and heavy.

"Are you surprised?"

The 'Wolf' quietly asked. Hazeline lightly shook her head and slowly approached him. And then...

"......What are you doing?" (Sae-Jin)

...She began tickling him around his neck area as one would a young puppy.

"Oh. Well, uh, your fur looked so beautiful, so... Wow, but why is your fur so shiny and smooth? It's like touching silk..."

Hazeline was definitely not shocked or frightened by his appearance. Feeling relieved by this development, Sae-Jin stared at the Elf woman who was deeply absorbed in stroking his fur, before his eyes slowly closed shut. And...

"Huh? H, hey!! Eu-ark!"

He then fell on top of Hazeline, totally unconscious.

That was the aftereffect of using 'Warrior of Reversal' three times – twice as the Orc, and once as the Lycanthrope.

*

Kim Sae-Jin opened his eyes. His eyesight was incomparably clear and the world was filled with vibrant colours. He figured that his Eyes of the Wolf was active currently. Although he wanted to stay still like this, there was this ticklish sensation coming from his side.

So, when he turned his neck to see why, he caught the sight of Hazeline, her lips tightly shut and protruding slightly, still unnecessarily absorbed in brushing his fur.

Dumbfounded, Sae-Jin stared at her for a while. Even then, she repeated the cycle of brushing his fur, toyed around with it, and grabbing a handful of it – until finally, she realised he was looking at her.

"Heh..." (Hazeline)

Avoiding meeting his gaze out of embarrassment, she scratched the back of her neck.

"What are you doing?" (Sae-Jin)

"...Weeeell, your fur is so smooth and supple and soft, so... it feels really nice to the touch, you know? It improves my mood so much when I'm touching it. It's kinda like... popping a bubble wrap?"

"......" (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin narrowed his eyes and lightly flung his tail to slap her cheek. It was nothing much, but unfortunately, it seemed that in his current 'Wolf' form, the attack power was twice as strong than normal.

"Kkyahk!!" (Hazeline)

After that was dealt with, Sae-Jin reverted back to his human appearance and searched for a mirror. This place was quite foreign to him, though. Was it Hazeline's home, he wondered.

"Fuu-woo..."

Finding a full-length mirror, Sae-Jin stood at a weird angle next to it and began breathing in deeply. He muttered out, "Please, please, please..."

"It's the same. You haven't changed." (Hazeline)

From his back, he heard Hazeline's spoiler. He got surprised by that revelation and turned to look at her, before taking a proper good look at himself as reflected by the mirror.

Thankfully, there hadn't been any noticeable changes, if he

disregarded the profile of his nose which had risen up a bit.

"Whew.... What a relief."

Sae-Jin smiled thickly, and lightly slapped both of his cheeks.

"I guess people might wonder if I had some work done on my face or something." (Sae-Jin)

As he began to speak in jest, Hazeline walked and stood next to him.

The reflection of her showed just how incredibly beautiful she was. He just could not find any blemishes on her facial features whatsoever, even with the much-improved eyesight of the Lycanthrope.

"Heheh. I think so too. After all, you have become even more handsome than before." (Hazeline)

With her eyes arching into crescent moon shape, she studied Sae-Jin's reflection in the mirror. And then, she began lightly stroking his shoulders and whispered softly.

"...I'm really, really thankful for your help yesterday. Without Mister Sae-Jin there, I'd probably have died then."

It was a simple, and somewhat short words of gratitude from her. However, his heart beat harder the moment he sensed how sincere she was from those words.

"...Miss Hazeline, you're taller than I thought."

That's why he quickly changed the topic.

Hazeline always wore a lengthy robe that covered pretty much everything from the top of her head right down to her heels, so seeing her in regular casual wear, he couldn't help but appreciate her perfectly balanced figure.

"...Well, Elves are... we're mostly like that. The average height of female Elves are around 170, so I'm just slightly taller than the rest, is all."

Hazeline blushed slightly and retreated away from Sae-Jin.

"If that is all, I shall be heading off to work now. Oh, and I'll keep Mister Sae-Jin's Trait as a secret between us, so you don't have to worry."

"Thank you very much."

She picked up the large robe discarded on the couch and put it on, then left her home looking exactly like as he'd known her until now. But before she left...

"Ah, right. Mister Sae-Jin, I'm really sorry. Because of me, you had to go through that ordeal.... To think those Mafiosi would resort to learning black magic...."

However, it seemed that her misunderstanding had not been resolved yet until now.

< 25. Intensification (3) > Fin.

Chapter 87: Truth? (1)

The changes in Sae-Jin's life after evolving into the Lycanthrope was quite varied. Firstly, his outward appearance hadn't changed all that much, but the physical abilities had gone through a massive change. Although, having said that, maybe he had become too famous or something – when he made his first public appearance there were quiet rumours of him having some work done on his face whispered around.

As an example, he didn't have to assume the form of a 'Wolf' in order to twist metal with his bare hands, not to mention he could also cut away Mana of the Knights as well.

And thanks to many new Passives he acquired, both the Orc and the Goblin Forms also enjoyed increase in power along with his human form. Notably, the synergy between the Goblin Form and the Passive Skills of the Lycanthrope were so good, it led Sae-Jin to think seriously about leveling up his Goblin Form in earnest.

However, not every change could be classified simply as a positive one.

It was during training; he got scared all of a sudden, watching Yi Hye-Rin panic after he 'destroyed' Mana with the literal single fist strike. He was scared, wondering whether he would be able to suppress the instincts of the Lycanthrope which were as strong as that power he had just demonstrated unwittingly.

But it seemed that Sae-Jin's personality had changed subtly as well without him being able to notice it, and things like his worries were quickly forgotten.

"Thank you for your hard work today."

He began massaging Yi Hye-Rin's shoulders as she sat on the training facility floor, her breath shallow and heavy. It was the first time she came in physical contact – AKA skinship – with Sae-

Jin, but since she did not sense any ulterior motive behind his actions, not to mention it felt refreshing as well, Yi Hye-Rin didn't offer any resistance.

"Oh. Yes, my... pleasure..."

Although she replied this way, Hye-Rin could definitely sense a chilly glare being shot towards her. She didn't have to check to figure out who was behind it.

"Well then, Miss Hye-Rin. I'll be leaving first. Take care during the remainder of your training, and please give the recruitment process for the new Society members your consideration." (Sae-Jin)

Kim Sae-Jin had made a request to all the current Society members. Separate from the soon-to-be launched second open recruitment, he told them to select people who might serve as their own 'direct subordinates' within the Society.

"Yes, sir. I'm looking real hard right now~."

Yi Hye-Rin replied enthusiastically. Actually, there were already one or two people busy trying to kiss her a*s, after somehow hearing about this whole thing. Heck, there were a few Knights with pretty good backgrounds asking her outright if she'd like any new piece of equipment, even...

Since Yi Hye-Rin focused more on a person's nature more than anything else, such behaviours made her feel just a bit bitter inside. But still, she accepted it as the result of her Society's prestige rising up so high.

"Ah, right. By the way, Guild Master, didn't you make a schedule for my Tattoo a couple of weeks ago~?"

She then suddenly recalled it. The special treatment only the members of The Monster received, the Magic Tattoos – the thing that made pretty much every other Knights and Wizards go crazy with envy and jealousy; the thing that some folks criticised as

being a cheat that didn't even require proper hard work from its recipients.

Finally, it was Yi Hye-Rin's turn after others had their fun already.

"Surely, you didn't forget, did you~?"

To get a rise out of Yu Sae-Jung, Yi Hye-Rin deliberately approached Sae-Jin with flirty steps and began 'lightly' touching him here and there. She could hear a person gritting her teeth from somewhere, but Hye-Rin also 'lightly' ignored that.

"Of course. I didn't forget. Please come find me on next week Saturday."

Sae-Jin smiled and replied, then stepped outside the training facility. Not too long after that, Yu Sae-Jung hoofed it towards Hye-Rin in an angry, stomping gait.

"...Unni, are you openly declaring war?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

Yu Sae-Jung narrowed her eyes and glared, but...

"Mm? Dunno what you mean~?"

...Yi Hye-Rin simply replied back with an easy-going smile.

- Since we have snagged such an important guest for today, I've got this feeling that our ratings will go right through the roof.

A current affairs show could be seen on TV. Its 'format' was quite simple in execution, so much so that there were only a few chairs present with a black background in the studio. The emcee and the guest would simply chat away on the current hot button topics.

But it would be unwise to dismiss this show because of its simplicity – since it was known as the best of its kind in the Republic of Korea, after all.

- The number one Society people wish to join! The number one

Society employees wish to work for! On top of this, entering the world of business proper with the establishment of the corporation, 'TM' – please welcome the Society Chairman of The Monster, Mister Kim Sae-Jin.

When the emcee finished his intro, Sae-Jin inside the TV screen bowed his head towards the camera.

- How do you do. Name's Kim Sae-Jin.
- I gotta say, I'm greatly intrigued. Didn't you refuse making an appearance on pretty much every single show out there? Why did you agree so easily to come on this one?

The emcee's voice was seemingly filled to the brim with pride.

– Well, that is... The reason's simple, actually. I've been a fan of this show for a while now, and it seems that our Society has been in the media's spotlight quite often lately. So, I've decided to come here and scratch that itch of curiosity in the audience at home. Also, this was the most important part... it turns out that your show has the shortest recording time compared to others. (Kim Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin's actual reason for this appearance was his own curiosity. After evolving into the Lycanthrope, Sae-Jin had lost quite a bit of inhibition in his personality. And now, having a lot of leeway with his 'time', he was getting rather interested in appearing on a TV show. It just happened so that this one called him up first before anybody else.

- Haha. You have quite a good sense of humour, sir~. It's true that we don't take up a lot of time to record, though.

The show started with laughter, and gradually, they moved on to other subjects. First, they talked about his family background. Secondly, the reason why he founded The Monster as well as its explosive growth of late. Thirdly, the allure (?) of plastic surgery. And finally, even the thing many viewers were no doubt curious

about - the 'treasure' crafted by the Orc Blacksmith.

Kim Sae-Jin seen on the TV screen showed not one moment of nervousness and smoothly carried on with the conversation. It was the moment the Skills 'Eloquence' and 'Pleasant Voice' showed off their true worth.

To think of himself in that manner was just a bit... But the truth was, the combination of his nice voice, excellent eloquence and the handsome face as seen on the TV screen made him come across as a gentle and wonderful man.

As if to reinforce that notion, the show's ratings had increased by two and a half times. The reactions of the viewers were also very positive as well. And after making that one appearance, his social media followers had increased by another two hundred thousand.

If it was by this much, then, wasn't this the proof of everyone thinking along the same thing as him and not the case of simple narcissism?

"Guild Master, the auction will begin in three hours."

And so, as Sae-Jin was deeply submerged in narcissism that wasn't, Jo Hahn-Sung opened the door and entered the waiting room. He had combed his hair up to look neat and tidy for the occasion, but as if to show how nervous he was, his fingers were trembling noticeably.

"What's the current situation like?" (Sae-Jin)

"Haha. It's no joke out there, sir. Maybe it's the first auctioning of a Treasure grade item in ages that's to blame, but regardless, I heard that there are ten helicopters flying above the Hyunwol Auction House as we speak. There were apparently more, but it seems that, due to safety concerns, they had to be grounded."

Jo Hahn-Sung changed the channel on the TV, saying that Sae-Jin should see for himself. Right now, it was Saturday evening – according to regular schedule, entertainment programmes should be on the public broadcasting channels, but almost all of them were covering the auction being held at the Hyunwol.

- At 8 o'clock this evening, the auctioning process for the heaven shaking work crafted by the Orc Blacksmith will finally take place. The weapon that was unanimously judged as the genuine Treasure grade by 10 judges from both the local and international Blacksmith Associations, is now named as...

The Hyunwol Auction House as seen within the TV screen looked really busy. There were seemingly tens of thousands of regular people gathering around the vicinity of the Sebit island where the auction house was located on; and the professional bodyguards were working tirelessly as the stream of high-value individuals continued to enter the auction venue unabated.

– Indeed! We can even see that the Britain's top ranked Knight, Arthur Fontere has come as well. Previously, Mister Fontere had strongly expressed his determination to procure this Treasure on his social media posts as well as on interviews with various Korean media outlets. It's a well known fact that he has sent numerous video messages to both the Chairman Kim Sae-Jin and the Orc Blacksmi... Oh! Oh! Over there! We just spotted the Prime Minister of Japan, Mister Naraka, entering the auction venue!!

The cameras filmed the Japanese Prime Minister entering the auction venue in a hurry as if someone was busy chasing him down or something.

Kim Sae-Jin let out a hollow chuckle. That guy had shown up in the end, after all that yapping on and on about some national pride and whether he was coming or not.

"I hear that the Japanese Prime Minister is personally accompanied by 20 odd Knights as well. And they are all supposedly Highest Tiers to boot. I think the Japanese and their strong desire to acquire the merchandise is now on the national level."

No matter how valuable an equipment was, if there was no one capable of using it, it would be a waste of everyone's time. Also, if a Knight didn't become its new owner, there was a real danger of the sword becoming the part of the so-called "future investment portfolio" and rot away in some dimly-lit vault somewhere.

That was why Sae-Jin placed a condition for purchase. The only ones eligible to buy the weapon were Knights – and even among them, those without ability would be eliminated from the process through the Orc's evaluation.

"Really?" (Sae-Jin)

"Yes, sir. But besides that... You should be getting ready, sir."

Jo Hahn-Sung fiddled around the edges of his tie once more before taking in a deep breath. However, Kim Sae-Jin simply waited, while his gaze alternated between his phone and Hahn-Sung.

And after about three minutes went by like that...

SFX for a mobile phone vibrating

His mobile began buzzing.

"Oh. Well, I, uh... will have to show up a bit later. I mean, our merchandise is the finale of the auction, anyway." (Sae-Jin)

Leaving behind the panicking Jo Hahn-Sung, Sae-Jin hurriedly moved his feet.

The call was from Yu Baek-Song.

The very best timing for sharing of sensitive information was right now, when almost all the agents of the SID were assigned as the guards of the auction venue.

*

" "

Feeling dumbfounded, Kim Sae-Jin's eyes narrowed to a slit.

- "That is absolutely the everything I could uncover. Any more than that, well..." (Yu Baek-Song)

Yu Baek-Song pointed at the manila envelope with a slightly uneasy expression. But that wasn't the reason why Sae-Jin was feeling miffed at the moment.

"Hey, what the hell? Do I look like a criminal to you?!"

Although they were in Yu Baek-Song's house, there was a thick plate glass standing between him and her, the kind one might find in a visiting room inside a prison. No, that was not strictly accurate, as there were air holes in those glasses in the visiting room. This place was sealed up so tight, they were actually conversing through their mobile phones.

- "Can't be helped. Your scent robs me of my judgement, after all."
 - "...Fuu."
 - "In any case, check out the documents first."

Sae-Jin was deeply dissatisfied by this arrangement, but regardless, he still picked up the envelope.

- "The contents are the results of secret autopsy procedures performed by us, the National Police Agency. I even went through the last available records to make sure, but that's all there is."

He slowly absorbed the contents of the documents. There wasn't a lot of information to go through – only three pages' worth. But he did his best not to miss one single letter.

And the information contained within was shocking to him, to say the least.

[Kim Jae-Hyuk. Savagely murdered by Vampire(s) while returning home after completing his duties, his corpse ripped apart. The case is now classified as a homicide with grudge suspected of being the motive after the blood of the victim was found largely untouched within the body. —The rest of the information has been erased—]

[Analysis of Kim Jae-Hyuk's blood content reveals that only 88% of it is human-based; one of his ancestors is suspected to be non-human.]

[Jin Soh-Jung. Requested for witness protection programme from the SID. Her whereabouts were leaked, resulting in her rape & murder by Vampire(s). Eyewitness testimony indicates the victim was seen talking to an unknown male for a considerable length of time. The contents of the conversation is suspected to be in relation to her son.]

[After the recovery of the influential House of Bathory's symbol at the crime scene, the prime suspect is now seen as a Vampire from the Bathory family.]

[....All information deleted....]

'Something' was trying to force its way out of his throat and he couldn't even swallow down his saliva.

- "...I'm sure there is much to take in. The result of the autopsy shows that, although he was a bit peculiar, your father was a human. After all, it's a bit of a stretch to call an '88%' as a halfling or a quarterling, right? And since your mother was definitely human, you don't have worry about what you are – you're also human."

Yu Baek-Song carefully continued. However, not one word could enter Sae-Jin's ears.

He rummaged through the documents for a very long time, his hands trembling uncontrollably – then he stopped. His breathing ragged and heavy, Sae-Jin stared at Yu Baek-Song. His eyes were full of confusion and rage.

"Is there no other way to find out what got deleted? Those should be the most important information of them all."

- "Yeah, well, it's impossible right now. That is the limit of my current position, after all."
 - "...Your position, you say?"
 - "Yeah. I told you. I have other people above me..."
 - "In that case..."

Kim Sae-Jin clenched his fist tightly. He was already well aware of his parents being murdered. But he simply had no idea how incredibly bad and agonising their final moments were.

He just could not rein in this tsunami-like waves of rage boiling in his heart. So much so, even he was beginning to think that such an anger was unusual for him. There probably was a side effect from evolving into the Lycanthrope at play here, but right now, Sae-Jin was not in the correct frame of mind to question his current state at all.

- "H, hey, wait a second!! What are you trying to do? Sto..."

He slammed the glass with his fist.

Kwaaahang!!

The ultra-tough reinforced glass shattered into pieces, and Yu Baek-Song looked at the result with her eyes completely round. She was wondering just how the heck the glass reinforced with magic could be breached this easily...

"In that case, all we have to do is to move Miss Yu Baek-Song up the career ladder, no?"

Sae-Jin ripped the bothersome glass completely off, and then grasped the scruff of hurriedly-fleeing Yu Baek-Song's neck.

"Euck! Tha, that isn't a simple thing at all!! But besides that, lemme go, right now!! I can send you straight to jail if I want to, you kno..."

"For now, please be quiet."

The only thing filling up Sae-Jin's head, now that he had lost much of his reasoning, was purest form of rage.

"It is simple. I'll support you. I've accumulated enough power and influence for that."

His voice was trembling as the words flowed out.

"No matter who sits above you, push him away and take that position. Then, everything shall be resolved that way."

""

While gently stroking her hair, the corners of his lips were lifting up in a fake smile. His brown eyes were gleaming coldly, enough to give a person goosebumps.

Yu Baek-Song gave up looking into those eyes. Her body was shaking all on by itself. It was the first time this White Tiger had felt like this – the sensation of being a prey standing before a true predator.

< 26. Truth? (1) > Fin.

Chapter 88: Truth (2)

Within the VVIP hall of the Hyunwol Auction House, hundreds of important figures had gathered. They were the kind of people that held prominent positions in their chosen field of profession.

Nominally, only the Knights could potentially purchase the Treasure grade weapon, but there were quite a few people participating as a representative of other Knights in order to build personal connections as well as to broaden their horizons.

That was probably why there was such a diverse melting pot of people that ignored race, nationality, and species within the auction venue, where Knights, big shots from the world of politics and commerce as well as mega celebrities the likes of which South Koreans had never experienced before were busy rubbing shoulders currently.

But all these men and women of great fame were looking for one man's whereabouts in particular.

And that person was Kim Sae-Jin.

"...Why isn't he coming?"

As the auction went under way, a worried Yu Sae-Jung repeatedly looked around while asking Jo Hahn-Sung. For some strange reason, she seemed to be shrinking away like a loser which was quite unlike her usual proud and confident self.

"Even I'm not... Well, he did say he'll come before the finale, but he also mentioned not to wait for him."

"...Fuu."

Sae-Jung let out a sigh. However, it was closer to a relieved sigh rather than a worried one.

In all honesty, she was feeling quite worried.

Currently, there were just way too many Elves and Fox-type Soo-

ins who were famous the world over for their blinding, transcendent beauty everywhere she looked within this venue. And they were the reason why Yu Sae-Jung had lost all of her usual confidence.

She felt that, compared to those women, she seemed to be lacking in so many areas. Why did her face have to be so angular, and why were her legs so short? For the first time in her life, she began to feel resentment towards her dad.

"He's coming for sure, you'll see. Don't you worry." (Joo Ji-Hyuk)

Joo Ji-Hyuk, still clueless, tried to comfort her unnecessarily. Sae-Jung nodded her head lightly, pulled out her phone and then began typing a text message. The recipient was 'Sae-Jin Oppa~'. Only his name had the honour of having an emoticon next to it, among hundreds saved in her list of contacts.

[Oppa, we will take very good care of the auction, so if there's something urgent going on, you don't have force yourself to come.]

And just as she hit 'send'...

"Finally! We shall commence with the last lot of the auction, the one all you've been looking forward to!"

As the emcee's loud voice settled down heavily on the auction venue, the Orc Blacksmith's masterpiece revealed itself to the world.

The 'treasure', wrapped tightly in a thick veil, was moved to the centre of the hall. The collective sounds of people swallowing their saliva echoed around the venue.

"The one that will go down in the annals of history. I present to you, the true treasure crafted by the brilliant Orc Blacksmith, the sword 'Gram'." (TL: just in case some of you readers are not familiar with Norse mythology, Gram is the name of the sword wielded by Sigurd to slay the dragon, Fafnir. Google is your friend.

Yes.)

A chaos broke out in the auction hall when it was revealed that the Blacksmith dared to pilfer the name of the legendary artifact for his own creation.

"According to the Blacksmith himself, he tried his very best to replicate the Gram of the legends as exactly as possible."

The moment emcee pulled the veil off the sword, all that doubt and dissatisfaction morphed into admiration and amazement.

Some Knights couldn't sit still anymore and shot up from their seats, even.

The lengthy, pure-white mithril blade; the hilt shining with an exquisite golden hue; the sword that boasted a smooth and neat appearance, the Gram reflected the lights from the venue to a blinding level.

The now-trademark symbol of the Orc Blacksmith – the intricate carvings – was absent on its exterior, making it look a bit plain, but all the Knights gathered here instinctively knew. That truly was one of the greatest 'treasures' the world have seen yet.

"And so, the auction will commence from now on. The starting bidding amount will be set at \$4.5 million USD. The minimum increase will be \$100 thousand USD...."

Just as the emcee announced this...

Suddenly, the entrance to the auction hall opened.

And the man who showed up from the opened gap was, without a doubt, the protagonist of this auction – Kim Sae-Jin himself.

Looking bashful for his interruption, he quickly moved his feet and went towards his assigned seat.

Of course, people wouldn't let him go by just like that. Every single one of them tried their best to engage Sae-Jin in a conversation, and so, the start of the auction had to be delayed for

*

The auction for the final item lasted for over two hours.

The final hammer price was... \$165 million USD. No matter how steep the competition for it was, it truly was a ridiculous amount. (TL: Holy cow. That's like, an operating budget of a medium-sized Formula One team. For the WHOLE year, no less.)

And the lucky bidder was...

[The Raven Knights Order, succeeds in finally bidding for the sword with \$165 million....]

[The uncomfortable backstory; the Korean government decides to support the Raven Order. Is the Dawn Order being suppressed?]

[The sword 'Gram'; the man who reenacted the legend, the Orc Blacksmith is already one of the greats.]

It was the Raven Knights Order – in other words, the Republic of Korea.

Considering that it was a Treasure grade item, the final bid price was slightly on the low side, but this result was somewhat within expectations. (TL: Eh?! But you just wrote it was a ridiculous amount? Make up your mind, Mr. Author...)

If an overseas entity were to snap up this sword, then the real amount they would have to pay at the end of it all, would be 4~5 times the bidding price, thanks to special tariffs applicable to luxury goods, special tax ascribed from the 'special' law, value added tax, etc, etc... Not to forget, one had to also consider policies of the Hyunwol Auction House, the ones about having to 'pay the entire amount in cash' and keeping to a strict 'payment time schedule'.

All those representatives of nations and Knights Orders hoping against hoping had to return home satisfied in the knowledge that

they were able to personally witness a Treasure-grade sword with their own eyes.

Many international media expressed their dissatisfaction and regret at the Korean government openly supporting one of their own – the criticism was especially harsh from the Japanese, as they were the ones who had bidded till the bitter end.

However, even then, what dominated the international headlines was not dissatisfaction, but the beautiful exterior of the Treasuregraded sword, Gram.

That pure-white blade and that perfectly manufactured hilt. And contained within that relatively simple appearance, the power matching up to its legendary namesake.

After making the hearts of every Knight flutter with nothing but its name and a single photo, Gram easily took the position of 30th out of 100 best weapons in existence as voted by the 'Time' magazine. And the Orc Blacksmith was admitted to the ranks of the world's greatest blacksmiths.

And then, the Raven Knights Order decided to award the sword Gram to its current Order Master, Kim Hyun-Seok as a loan lasting for the period of 10 years. The ceremony was broadcast live and caused quite a stir among the populace.

In the end, it was a sort-of victory for both the Korean government as they didn't let their treasure taken away, and for the Orc Blacksmith with his fame now spreading to the rest of the world.

However, now that the Orc Blacksmith had suddenly become a hot topic of conversation, a strange and 'nonsensical' rumour about his real identity also began circulating around, one where it was alleged that Kim Sae-Jin was actually the Orc all along.

While the entirety of the Korean peninsula was still rumbling on from the excitement of the auction, Kim Sae-Jin had to answer an emergency summons from the Monster Mercenary Company before he could come down from all that euphoria.

"We've finally come across the information on the hotel where the Vampires I've mentioned before are staying currently." (Kim Yu-Sohn)

With 130 intelligence operatives and 50 field agents AKA Mercenaries, Sae-Jin's Company now boasted a better information gathering network than most underground organizations. On the amount of secrets he knew alone, he had already surpassed most media outlets by now.

"The hotel is called 'Romance of Dawn'. Not only were the strange happenings occurring on the building's top floors clearly been observed, the angry voices of a woman and traces of magic being used were recorded in the security systems installed on the corridors." (Kim Yu-Sohn)

"...Then, just who exactly is staying there?"

"We suspect it to be a 'Bathory'."

In that instant, killing intent flickered in Sae-Jin's eyes, his fists clenching tightly.

Even if it was sudden, the name 'Bathory' was already deeply ingrained in his psyche. The cops did find a symbol of Bathory at the crime scene of his mother's death, after all.

Finally, he had found the place these bastards were hiding in. So, this could be unexpectedly easy for...

"No, sir. Bathory's powers are far too great for us to do anything at the moment. The rumours speak of the Bathory family head possessing enough power to level a mountain with a flick of a hand and dye the sky jet black. That means, even without all that exaggeration, this prey is an incredibly powerful foe." (Kim Yu-Sohn)

However, Kim Yu-Sohn put an end to Sae-Jin's thought process.

"I have fought against countless Vampires, so I can confidently say this much – the hidden strength accumulated through the passing of Vampiric bloodlines is simply beyond our scope of imagination." (Kim Yu-Sohn)

What Kim Yu-Sohn was saying, was that they should be satisfied with just knowing where the Vampires were and wait for the right opportunity.

"...Is the b*****d really that strong?"

"Yes. It's possible that the family head alone could equal a single Knights Order. After all, these are the creatures that have sacrificed their own race's leader in pursuit of power." (TL: I've no idea where this one's coming from. I've TLed the line literally.)

Kim Sae-Jin could only nod his head as this was a considered opinion from a veteran who had fought against Vampires for over half of his life.

"...Fuu. Then, let's just head to the basement for now. Oh, right. Did you make sure to secure all the access points?"

"Of course, sir. Let us hurry. The 'kids' have grown so much lately."

*

Sae-Jin was currently in his Goblin Form.

However, his current location was a bit unusual.

It was not the usual Monster field, but the basement located below the grounds of the Society, The Monster.

Around three weeks ago, Sae-Jin ordered Kim Yu-Sohn to open up a space in the basement.

Of course, since the purpose of this space was not something that could be explained to the public, even the members of his Society had to be kept in the dark as well.

There was a variety of uses for this basement area, but the most

prominent one was the 'village of Goblins'.

As of now, Monsters known as Goblins were facing extinction in Korea. The only reason why such weak Monsters were able to survive in the first place was because they had formed large packs; but then, the distortion of the earth's crust happened and these creatures ended up getting separated from one another.

And so, Sae-Jin began taking in those Goblins that had nowhere left to go, and just like his actions as the Hero Orc, he decided to take care of these critters as well. Besides, quite unlike those Orcs who were only good for fighting, Goblins had much more value to offer overall.

Well, the old saying 'Goblins are craftier than humans' didn't come out of nothing, after all.

First of all, if these Monsters took care of crafting potions, then he'd not have to waste his precious time on doing that anymore, and as far as their Witchcraft was concerned, the potential application for them was just too numerous to count.

... That was, as long as they leveled up properly, of course.

"Nice. They are quite obedient, aren't they?"

These creatures were pretty quick on the uptake. They were hard workers and were easy to educate as well. Well, he did threaten them a bit while in the Lycanthrope form so there was that but still, they displayed unexpected amount of loyalty and honesty.

"Keep on making those potions as I showed you, got it? And Witchcraft Goblins continue on with your research."

Kim Sae-Jin shouted out at the Goblins. They replied back with their own shouts of Kkyahahk-!

"Is it because of the good 'welfare benefits'? They unexpectedly work so hard," said Kim Yu-Sohn, with a smile on his face.

Although it was weird to say 'welfare benefits' for Monsters, it

was actually happening right here. The Goblins living in this place were blessed with humane living quarters, and received clean food and drinking water three times a day. The food was leftovers from the Society's cafeteria, though.

"Well, besides that – how goes the gathering of information so far?"

Changing back to the appearance of a human before anyone had noticed it, Sae-Jin asked Kim Yu-Sohn.

"Sir. It seems that Miss Yu Baek-Song's immediate superior is the Minister in Charge of Bureau of Monster Affairs, Kim Hahn-Seol. As he had served as the former Chief of National Police, his martial prowess is considerable, and he also has many personal connections, such as members of Parliament, an executive director in the Dawn Corporation, etc, etc. He is your typical ambitious, driven man."

"Oh, really?"

Kim Sae-Jin fell into a thought, while scratching his chin.

And exactly ten seconds later, his phone vibrated. He narrowed his brows and checked out who the caller was – it was Jo Hahn-Sung.

"Hello?"

- "Guild Master, it's Jo Hahn-Sung. We just received a request for a meeting with a government's representative over the matter of the Guild registration. And he's a Minister, as well."

"Keheum... Okay, what's his name?"

Sae-Jin couldn't help but feel rather emotional at the fact that from being an orphan, he had climbed up in the societal ladder to enjoy a private meeting with a government minister. But such an emotion only lasted for a brief moment.

- "He's called Kim Hahn-Seol, the Minister in Charge of Bureau

of Monster affairs."

"...Oh? Well, I got it. Please inform the other party that I'd like to meet him as soon as possible."

- "Yes, sir. I understand."

Sae-Jin ended the call.

"What's the matter, sir?"

Kim Yu-Sohn asked from the side.

"Just now, a reason to meet up with that minister just came around. Looks like... I'll be able to properly check out what kind of man he is."

Sae-Jin smiled thickly and replied.

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The following day.

As usual, Sae-Jin headed off to the Monster field.

The first thing he did was to change into the Hero Orc Form and went to the village to see what was what. The number of the Orcs living there had increased to three digits, and judging by the fact that the two 'real' leader Orc Jaguars had seemingly leveled up to Orc Great Warriors somehow, it was clear there was no longer a need for him to worry about their survival anymore.

Feeling relieved, he then headed towards the upper Mid Tier hunting ground.

He then quickly began searching for Monsters to smash. But during all that, he ended up running into a rather bothersome individual. Actually, he was the one who went to see them first.

It was Kim Yu-Rin.

And she was currently with an unknown man.

From what he could overhear from the distance, this man's name was definitely 'Kim Hahn-Seol'.

Although they were scheduled to meet in three days' time... it wouldn't be so bad to see what this guy's attitude and personality were like beforehand.

< 26. Truth? (2) > Fin.

Chapter 89: Truth? (3)

The man named Kim Hahn-Seol.

His story was like this: three years before graduating from the university, he joined the Special Investigation Division. He was 21. Blessed with a certain Trait, good ability and keen street-smarts, he earned the trust of the then-Chief of the SID and saw a meteoric rise in his career. But in his fifth year with the organization, he was implicated in a rather ugly 'scandal' and was fired as a result.

However, for the next two years, he resolved the matter with his own two hands and made a triumphant return to the fold. Then, for the next eight years, he climbed up the ladder within the SID and became its Chief. Even now, well after he had retired from the post, this man still lorded over the National Police Agency as its most powerful figure.

Today was the first time Kim Sae-Jin met this man face to face. Hahn-Seol's face looked quite young – Sae-Jin had heard that this man's actual age was in the late 40s but he looked in his early 30s, instead.

"...His colours aren't so bad."

Both the hues of his eyes, and the aura coming off of him didn't lean particularly towards any side which meant he was 'neutral'. Quite frankly, Sae-Jin was taken aback by this revelation; after all, he had been under the intense grip of this expectation, where the person responsible for erasing all evidence of his parents' murders would turn out to be the most dastardly villain out there.

"In any case. I hope you're carrying out my orders well."

"Yes, I am. You don't have to worry."

Him and Kim Yu-Rin were talking about an unknown topic. Kim Hahn-Seol looked energetic, but she seemed burdened by something weighty.

"Indeed. But there is no need for you to be that diligent. After all, it is..."

Sensing a presence nearby, Hahn-Seol stopped his words and turned towards Sae-Jin's direction. And as soon as confirming that presence was an Orc, he unsheathed a short sword mounted on his hips.

However, Kim Yu-Rin quickly stopped him.

Plus, she was gripping Hahn-Seol's arm strong enough to send him into a bit of panic as well.

"What, what are you doing?" (Kim Hahn-Seol)

"That's the Hero Orc." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"...But that doesn't mean it won't fight humans, correct?"

"Please withdraw your weapon as I'll be the one to resolve this."

Kim Yu-Rin was coldly adamant with her words, and Hahn-Seol had no choice but to do as she said. She then observed the mood of the Orc that simply stood there staring at the two of them, before lightly pushing Kim Hahn-Seol away.

"Excuse me, since we hunted for a while now, how about calling it a day and head home first, alone? It might get a little tougher for you from here onwards. I'll take care of the Orc."

"...Huh? But it's only been 30 minutes. I still have more than enough energy left." (Kim Hahn-Seol)

"No. Please go."

Kim Hahn-Seol was dumbfounded at her sudden stubbornness, but in the end, nodded his head in understanding.

"Well, if you insist that much... But regardless, consider deeply what I've told you before. It's important that you do."

With those parting words, Hahn-Seol left the area. The Orc's eyes chased after the escaping man's back.

"...It's been a while."

After Kim Hahn-Seol had completely left the vicinity, Kim Yu-Rin approached the Orc while her hands were carefully gathered in front of her chest. Seeing this, the Orc fell into a slight dilemma – should he just leave, or ask her what she and Hahn-Seol were talking about?

But to do the latter as an Orc, that made little sense. So, the Orc wordlessly turned around to leave, and that made Yu-Rin to hurriedly reach out and grab hold of his arm.

"W, w, wait... Please stay still for a second. Let's, let's talk..."

Unfortunately for her, the Orc didn't stop moving. And she continued to plead with him, asking him to stop all the while he dragged her around.

*

Kim Yu-Rin stubbornly followed him around. But she maintained a respectful distance to make sure the Orc wouldn't feel uncomfortable. When he stopped walking, she stopped too, and when he moved, she did the same.

Maybe it was because she hadn't seen him in over a month, although she was just following the Orc around without saying a single word, a gentle smile was visible on Kim Yu-Rin's lips.

But suddenly, the Orc stopped and turned around to look at her. Yu-Rin didn't panic and met his gaze.

"...Why meet that man?" (Sae-Jin the Orc)

"Ah? Oh, that... it's because of my work. There really aren't any other reasons."

She began to feel happy for some weird reason when the Orc asked her a question.

"No, not that, but what work?" (Sae-Jin the Orc)

But the Orc seemed to unwilling to let go. At this turn of events,

Kim Yu-Rin's head initially tilted to the side, before both the corners of her eyes and lips rose up in a naughty smile.

"Why should I tell you about that? And besides, why would an Orc ask about such a thing?"

She came to stand before the Orc, her hips swaying from side to side. The Orc seemed unhappy at the fact that she was trying to match up to him and his mouth was resolutely closed shut.

"...Can be curious. Orcs, like to know things." (Sae-Jin the Orc)

"Hmm~. If that's the case, once every week, would you like to spar with me?"

"...Spar?"

"Yep. It's not what you think, but simply to improve our abilities at the same time. For you, the leader of the Orc tribe, and for me, a leader who will have to oversee a Knights Order."

"Then you tell me why?"

Yu-Rin thought about this for a second before energetically nodding her head. Although it was classified information, the jealous (?) Orc in front of her was a Monster, after all.

"Yep!"

"...Fine."

Since he wanted to strengthen the Orc Form anyways, there was no loss for Sae-Jin either way in this arrangement as well.

"So then, next week... No, I mean, when the sun goes down and comes back up seven times – no, wait, five times, I'll come see you at your house. Okay?"

"Fine. Then you tell why..."

"I'll tell you the reason later. After we finish our first sparring together!"

Before he could do anything, Yu-Rin quickly ran away. In her

mind, she was thinking of making the Orc sit tight and wait around nervously.

""

The Orc simply gazed at her disappearing back with dumbfounded eyes.

After parting ways with Kim Yu-Rin, Sae-Jin returned home only to deal with another visitor.

This time, it was Hazeline. She came to his house while bearing a gift. Her misunderstanding from that event hadn't been cleared yet, and she simply wanted to say thanks for his timely aid – Sae-Jin thought that if he told her the truth, it'd be the same as dragging her into this conflict he had with the Vampires, so in the end, he chose not to clear the air up.

"Mm? You are watching yet another repeat broadcast of yourself on TV?" (Hazeline)

Sitting down on the living room's couch, Hazeline pointed at the TV and spoke. So, Sae-Jin quickly switched the channel.

"...Hah, haha... I don't have any other hobbies beside this one, so..."

"Really? But why did you change the channel? Why don't we watch it together? Isn't it more enjoyable sharing your hobby with someone else?"

Hazeline then snatched away the remote from Sae-Jin's hand and changed the channel again.

- Mister Kim Sae-Jin, this is not funny anymore, you know? The growth of The Monster is...

A talk show where the participants were gathered into one location and were told to converse was being broadcast on TV. Originally, one needed to be of an extraordinary background in

order to appear alone, but Sae-Jin was doing exactly that, occupying the guest's table all by himself.

"Wow. Mister Sae-Jin seems to have become this generation's top celebrity, no?" (Hazeline)

"...Please stop teasing me."

"Oops. Busted."

Initially, she only changed the channel to poke fun at him, but gradually, she too got absorbed in the show as well.

Sae-Jin's handsome face, now accentuated with makeup, just loved the attention from the overhead spotlights and the cameras. His funny and friendly eloquence was charming as well; also, there were those muscles that peeked out from the gaps of his clothing every now and then, too.

"What the – it's already finished?" (Hazeline)

The final comments from the emcee was coming out of the TV, meaning, she wasn't even aware of the passage of time and had dazedly smiled through the whole show.

"Wow... Mister Sae-Jin, so that's how you became the number one real-time search topic... Now I get it. As expected of a devilishly charming man, someone voted as the number one ideal man by the female Knights."

Hazeline nodded her head in deliberate showing of her understanding.

"A 'number one ideal man'? What on earth is that now?" (Sae-Jin)

"You didn't know? You've been voted as the top pick for the last three months in a row in a famous magazine for Knights."

"...*cough*."

Feeling embarrassed somewhat, Sae-Jin scratched the back of his neck while a grin he couldn't disguise broke out on his lips.

"Huhut. You are so adorable. Although, I gotta say, you can feel less happy now since it's the top pick not in the looks department but regarding your abilities. After all, you can find plenty of beautiful male Elf Knights out there." (Hazeline)

"...But, well, I knew that already." (Sae-Jin)

"Hahaht... Is that so? Oh, right. This is a present."

Hazeline giggled at him while her eyes were narrowed to a slit, before pulling out a small package from her bag. While sipping his tea, Sae-Jin accepted it.

"It's an artifact." (Hazeline)

"...An artifact?"

"Yes. And its effect is to strongly suppress sexual desires."

Sae-Jin came this close to spilling out the tea in his mouth.

"...Cough. But why so out of the blue...?"

"I saw that you've been ordering a lot of ingredients required for that lust suppressing potion lately. I thought you were really troubled by the whole thing, though?"

Sae-Jin opened the lid on the box. He found a simple-looking artifact styled to look like a bracelet inside.

"Ingesting lots of potions isn't so good for your body. So, instead, please wear this. Its effect is... well, I'm sure the potions Mister Sae-Jin makes are superior, but still."

She personally fitted the bracelet on Sae-Jin's wrist. Its colour resembled Hazeline's skin tone – pure white.

"...Will this thing take care of my... problem?"

"To a point. But that doesn't mean I'll be the one to take care of the rest, you know?"

Hazeline passed off an odd joke to him.

However, now that he had evolved into the Lycanthrope, even a

passing mention was enough to give Sae-Jin a huge stimulus. His body trembled noticeably for a moment or two before he let out a deliberately relaxed smile and shook his head.

"...Ha, hahah... Thank you for your help."

"Don't mention it. I've received a lot more from you, after all."

Hazeline laughed genially and got up from her seat.

"Well then, I should get going now~."

"Oh, right. Take care."

Sae-Jin got up as well to see her to the door.

"I'll talk to you later."

Putting her high heels back on, Hazeline lightly tapped on his broad shoulders and left through the front door. Sae-Jin was smiling in satisfaction as he watched her back.

As expected, even her posterior was as eye-catching as her front...

SFX for a mobile phone vibrating

Right on cue, his phone began vibrating. Yu Sae-Jung had sent him a message.

""

The contents of her message were so affectionate that it ended up making Sae-Jin feel guilty for some unfathomable reason.

*

During the night with a full moon brightening the sky.

The Lycanthrope's instincts proved to be incredibly difficult to contain. Doubts of him being no longer a human visited him in the middle of several nights as well.

Every time that happened, his rage surged and he just couldn't remain still. So, he began roaming around outside.

Changing into the appearance of the 'Wolf', he jumped across the

rooftops of tall skyscrapers while bathed in the moonlight. The leg strength of this Wolf form was so great that he could easily leap over a ten-story building with single jump. And during his speedy dash across the skyline while being bombarded by the harsh night air streaming past his skin – his blues seemed to dissipate, at least for a bit.

Most likely, he'd not remember what he was doing right now, come the following morning.

But it did not matter at all in this moment.

"...Fuu-ah."

Before he knew it, Sae-Jin found himself arriving on top of a very tall building. As he stood there, drinking the cold air in this high place, some of his burning instincts had cooled down somewhat.

"...Where is this place?"

While scratching the top of his head with the claws that were harder than mithril, Sae-Jin walked towards the roof railings. When he looked over, he could see nothing but deep darkness by the empty road way, way down below. However, the silver streaks from the neon-lit letters still managed to pierce the gloomy darkness.

'Romance of Dawn.'

This was the hotel where the Bathorys were staying currently. Sae-Jin momentarily freaked out. Did he subconsciously utilise the information gained while he was conscious?

But there wasn't enough time for him to leisurely figure this out. After all, he had sensed several presences just beyond the metal access door to the roof.

He was about to quickly get the hell out of there, but then, Sae-Jin stopped moving.

There were at least ten of them behind the door, but well, none

of them were strong enough to truly cause him any meaningful issues.

"...I can use Dark Energy Link here."

He stared at the metal door while thinking about the available Skill sets he could use. If he just captured one of them alive, couldn't he be able to extract valuable information on these Vampire bastards?

Kkahwahng!!

The metal door to the roof flung open with a loud bang.

"...What the?!"

Ten 'henchmen' hurriedly checked the situation on the roof to find the unknown creature that had allegedly breached the barrier.

"...Maybe it was a bird or something?"

When one of the henchmen spoke to an 'Apostle' of his suspicion, the moonlight brightening the area suddenly wavered.

It was as if the moon itself was trying to illuminate the hidden figure...

"Who goes there!!"

The Apostle shouted out. And at the same time, terrifying claws cut through one of the goons while drawing eerie lines in the air. It was just one attack, but then, those claws flowed around like as if they were being pulled along by chains and locked onto another Vampire nearby.

"Kkeuahahahkk!!"

"Euahahk!!"

In the blink of an eye, nine screams soared high into the sky.

Watching all of his subordinates perish, the Apostle panicked and opened his eyes ultra-wide.

And finally, he spotted a certain creature standing there,

reflecting the moonlight.

"Hiya."

A pair of silver eyes, and the wild mane that was the same colour as the moon; the protruding maws of a beast and incomparably sharp, piercing eyeline; and that smooth and supple fur – this beast that could talk, it could only be...

"

This appearance was the most terrifying thing this Vampire had seen. In the end, he fainted where he stood while showing the whites of his eyes and bubbles foaming out of his mouth.

< 26. Truth? (3) > Fin.

Chapter 90: Truth? (4)

The ranks of Vampires were divided into six.

From: slave \rightarrow commoner \rightarrow henchman \rightarrow Believer \rightarrow Apostle \rightarrow and finally, the Elder.

And to clarify further, the rank of slaves wasn't filled by Vampires. This was the class consisting of those non-Vampire races under the spell of 'charm' magic. In other words, they were literally slaves under the beck and call of the Vampires.

On the other hand, a Vampire had to be at least of the rank of 'foot soldier/henchman' in order to be treated as a real fighting force; the ones in this rank possessed combat prowess equal to that of low Mid to Mid Tier Knights or C~D ranked Wizards.

From here onwards, every elevation in rank corresponded with the hike in power equal to that of Knight's Tiers. So, at the level of an 'Apostle', it was at least around the mid High Tier Knights or the Wizards with rankings around A-.

However – if one was only strong at performing magic but not so much in physical abilities, then that person was as good as a sitting duck for the Lycanthrope. That was the case with the 'Apostle' Sae-Jin had captured alive just now, when this guy was compared to the other Apostles that attacked him and Hazeline a few days ago.

The name of this poor Apostle he caught was 'Rhosrahdel'. (TL: 로스라델) As he was still too young, the powers of his bloodline hadn't fully manifested yet, and thus his strength was no better than that of a 'Believer'.

"...It's the truth!!" (Rhosradel)

At least, according to his own mouth, that was.

"Well then, is that all the info you know?" (Sae-Jin the Lycan)

"Yes, yes!! Besides the stuff already revealed to the world, and the fact that Bathory is jumping around in anger, that's all I know, I swear-Ahhaaaahark!! Euahahaaark!! Ahhhakk!!"

The ever-so talkative Apostle began screaming his head off utterly frightened as soon as Sae-Jin pressed his face closer. This reaction was quite funny, so Sae-Jin let out a light chuckle that sounded like a threatening growl.

"Kkhek, kkeeeeececk..."

Because of that, though, foams bubbled up from the corners of the Vampire's mouth as if he was about to faint again.

Sae-Jin was a bit miffed about this, thinking, 'Is the Wolf's appearance that scary? I thought I looked pretty good, especially among other Wolves...'

"Hmm..."

Stepping back, Sae-Jin lightly scratched the fur on his chest with his claws while falling into a deep thought. He had already finished establishing the Dark Energy Link between himself and this Vampire. Since all his Skills increased in Proficiency Levels after his evolution to the Lycanthrope, if he went around this smartly, couldn't he be able to insert a mole within the Vampires' ranks?

"Oh, yeah. Isn't it possible to identify those 'slaves', normal people under the charm magic or whatever?" (Sae-Jin the Lycan)

He thought of this just now. This was the one of the main reasons why Vampires could exert enormous influence in the world, despite their numbers being low. Although this terrified guy did tell him that a full fledged Apostle could control up to five 'slaves with will', he still hadn't mentioned how big the scale of this whole thing was yet.

"H, huh? I, I don't know yet, who controls which slave. I haven't talked to many other Apostles because I'm still too young!"

"You don't even know your own slaves?"

"No!! Nononono. Of course I know who they are. I can tell you all you want to know, of course!"

Was it because this fool was still immature? His somewhat "honest" attitude even took Sae-Jin aback greatly. It was as if there was no need to even do the whole Dark Energy Link thing at all.

"There are only three people under me. An entertainer named Oh Yeon-Hui, an assistant prosecutor for the Seoul Metropolitan Area, Kim Soo-Ho, and finally, Yuk Soh-Hahn, a recently elected member of the National Assembly."

But when this Apostle told him of the type of people that was under his charm spell, Sae-Jin couldn't help but be astonished. To think that someone like Oh Yeon-Hui, who was considered as the top actress in South Korea was a 'slave' – not to mention, a prosecutor who was in direct contact with the centres of political power, as well as a member of the National Assembly, too...

Didn't this mean, Sae-Jin now had influence on those three, too? At this unexpected bonus, Sae-Jin's lips quivered in happiness.

"Keuhm. You only use big shots like them as slaves?"

"Oh, no, no, no. My luck was on the better side. I charmed them before they became famous and then I quietly supported them within my means. They climbed up to where they are by their own hands."

That was quite an acceptable answer.

"How interesting. However... since I got what I wanted, you no longer have any uses for me." (Sae-Jin the Lycanthrope)

Sae-Jin deliberately made an eerie smile and opened his palm wide. His hand, which was twice the size of the Vampire's head, drew a threatening shadow across the walls.

"Noooo!! Eu, euhaaaaahk!! P, please, waaaaaaiiiit!!"

The young Apostle's body writhed around while crying like a

baby. At the same time, he began hurling insults towards his useless 'colleagues' with a high-pitched voice that might split apart in a moment or two. Trashy henchmen, Apostles and Believers that were good for nothing, and finally, even his owners, the Bathorys.

How pathetic and desperate he must have been.

"...Oi."

Sae-Jin grabbed the Apostle's face and spoke. Since his mouth was covered by that huge hand, all he could do was to nod his head urgently.

"Wanna live?"

"Heu-beubeup!!"

Showing how much he wanted to carry on living, this Vampire even began licking Sae-Jin's palm.

"Oho, really?"

Looking down on this desperately pathetic weakling, Sae-Jin's lips twisted in an evil smile.

*

Five days later, the promised day with Kim Yu-Rin.

Sae-Jin waited for her to arrive in front of the Orc village and when she showed up like clockwork, he quickly changed into the Hero Orc and received her.

It seemed like Yu-Rin wanted to genuinely converse with him, judging by how much she was yapping on and on, but the 'Hero Orc' simply headed straight for the sparring arena. Although it was nominally a sparring arena, it was nothing more than some piece of land made up of rocks and earth for wrestling matches.

However, the actual sparring easily transcended the shabbiness of the arena with its ferociousness that matched up to a real battle.

The destructive mace attack that crushed the atmosphere itself, as well as the sword aura that cleanly carved through the air.

Kwaaahang!!

Humongous explosions of sounds reverberated around as if there was a mountain slide happening somewhere every time two weapons collided, with each one representing different combat style but ultimately, displaying similar levels of destructive power.

But in all honestly, Kim Yu-Rin wasn't going all out. Of course, with the exception of her Trait, she was using all of her physical prowess, but her true power lay with that Trait of hers.

For Sae-Jin in his Hero Orc Form, though – he was actually giving it 100%. He didn't activate the Warrior of Reversal, but as the spar progressed, his reasoning gradually faded away.

And in the end, watching her deftly deflect his attacks repeatedly and try to land in counters made him furious beyond words and he activated the Warrior of Reversal.

As one would expect, the atmosphere changed rapidly as reddish aura oozed out from the Orc's body.

"Kkeuck...!"

Unfortunately for him, her confused state lasted only for a blink. She struggled to deflect the mace powerfully smashing down on her, and then quickly dashed in closer to the Orc before hitting him on the arm with her Trait, 'Desideratum' active.

Thak.

To him, it felt a like a small pebble lightly tapping on his skin. Quickly dismissing it as nothing important, the Orc tried to shove her away into the distance with a shoulder tackle.

"…!!"

However, as if he was glued to the ground, his feet wouldn't budge. Only then did his hotheadedness cool down a bit, realising

what just had happened here.

'She assigned purpose into her sword.'

The reason why she could become the youngest-ever Highest Tier Knight, even if her Trait was not a growth-type.

She had used her Trait, in the end.

"Since you used a Skill first, I'm just returning the favour, right?"

Yu-Rin looked at the struggling Orc as if he was the cutest thing and then lightly tapped him in the head with her sword.

"It's my victory." (Yu-Rin)

'But you cheated!!' (Sae-Jin)

He was getting angrier the more he stared at Yu-Rin's beaming smile that showed how assured she was of her victory, which made him struggle even harder instead.

As long as he was the Orc, there was nothing much he could do against its nature. He knew well enough he shouldn't struggle so much, yet he tried to free his feet nonstop.

Muscles all over his body bulged like balloons ready to pop and blood vessels protruded visibly on his face.

"You should just give up now. The restraints won't be undone so easily since I spent quite a lot of Mana so..."

But she did not count on the Orc's persistence perfectly lining up with the 'System' itself.

[The host tried desperately to win against the mysterious power of the world.]

[That persistence has resulted in acquisition of the Passive Skill, 'Partial Resistance'.]

[The new Passive Skill reacts positively with the following: race 'Lycanthrope', property 'Mana Body', and race-unique Skill

'Divinity' of the Leviathan Form.]

[The Passive Skill 'Partial Resistance' has been converted to: 'Resistance'.]

[Resistance] [Proficiency Level: F-]

- The power that can interfere with the natural phenomena that is the foundation of the world, as well as able to resist the Concept and the Principle. (TL: yes, this is the literal TL.)

For a Skill acquired during a spar, there seemed to be lots of words popping up into his view. However, the Orc hurriedly dismissed those trivial matters and forcefully squeezed out every little drop of strength from this entire body.

And then – with sound of dirt falling off, his foot began to lift off the ground for real.

At that moment, Yu-Rin's face was dyed in the deep hues of utter shock.

However...

"...*Groan*"

As expected, it was still impossible to break free out of her restraints with only an F-Skill. The Orc faltered grandly in total exhaustion and even ended up dropping his mace.

The Orc became furious at the fact that his final struggle was all for naught, and at the same time, Yu-Rin was wordlessly swallowing down her saliva.

That was an event she had never experienced before. And so, she failed to understand what just happened there. Sure, there were times when she didn't have enough Mana, but when her Trait did activate, it would always work for her no matter what.

"Kheuarhak!"

While she was lost in her thoughts, the Orc began throwing tantrums as if to say having his legs restrained was getting rather irritating. She only then recovered her wandering mind and tried to pacify the Orc.

"Please wait for two more minutes. That restraint is supposed to last for three, you see."

*

It was now the break time after the sparring had ended.

The Orc walked towards Kim Yu-Rin who was busy wiping the sweat off her forehead, and handed her a wooden container with spring water in it.

"Oh. Thank you so much."

Yu-Rin smiled brightly and thanked him but Sae-Jin lightly dismissed that while plopping down on the ground to recheck the details of the Skill he had acquired.

[Resistance] [Proficiency Level: F-]

– The power that can interfere with the natural phenomena that is the foundation of the world, as well as able to resist the Concept and the Principle.

Both its name and the description sounded simple and ambiguous at the same time, but the longer he thought about it, it became clearer just how much potential there was with this Skill.

Able to interfere with the natural phenomena that was the foundation of the world, as well as the 'Concept' and the 'Principle'.

From those words, what Sae-Jin could come up with was – the Concept of Space, and the Principle of Time.

The actual possibility of this Skill allowing him to distort Space and reverse the flow of Time was pretty low. Especially considering that he earned this Skill during sparring, so understandably, his faith in it took a big hit.

But then again, there was this one thing that overwhelmingly

restored his faith in this Skill, somewhat:

[Skill Proficiency: 0.000%]

It was the amount shown on his Proficiency window. It was even lower than three decimal points, and he had to really concentrate to see the actual figure of [0.00075%]. If it was like this, then wouldn't that mean a lifetime of hard work might just get him to around the level of D~E at most...?

"You are not curious anymore?"

As he was submerged in these tough thoughts, she suddenly began talking to him. She was staring at the Orc who seemed to have zero interest in her with a pout.

"What... oh. Right."

The reason why she met with Kim Hahn-Seol. The Orc nodded his head and asked her about it.

"You don't seem to be curious about it anymore... but well, a promise is a promise, so..."

Yu-Rin let out a fake cough and continued.

"It's simply a favour from him, asking me to investigate and compile a report on a certain man. One of my subordinates happens to be close to him. I don't like doing it, though, since it feels like I'm snooping around behind that person's back."

She then subtly studied the Orc's reactions. His facial expression remained the same as before: fearsome.

"...Investigate?"

"Oh, that. Uhm, explaining that is a bit... complicated, so, uh... You see, we're affiliated with the government of... No, wait. I have a boss, you see. And this boss wants a detailed report on some other people. The reason for that is to... uh, make governance easier... well, honestly, even I don't know the real reason. I'm just doing it as I've been ordered to. If I don't, then it'll be troublesome

for my Order."

Now that he'd heard it, the matter wasn't so important after all. Now that his misunderstanding over how serious the matter was resolved, all tension left his body and so, the Orc let out a mighty yawn.

"Ahahahat... What is this? Even Orcs yawn?"

Kim Yu-Rin burst into a child-like laughter after seeing the Orc's ill timed yawn.

*

The favour Kim Hahn-Seol asked Yu-Rin was nothing more than a pretext, and the truth of his intentions was revealed after a week had passed by.

He was a member of the Society, 'Trilogy'. Not only that, he was its founding member, to boot – although ever since he became a government minister, he had left the Society, at least on the surface. It was Trilogy that resolved the disgraceful scandal he was suffering from in the past.

"We have detected a plot led by Kim Hahn-Seol to implicate you, the Guild Master. But the matter is quite complicated and it seems that we won't be able to prevent the news from breaking out." (Kim Yu-Sohn)

One could say that this attempt to suppress him wasn't just from Kim Hahn-Seol alone but from a certain 'Guild' as well. Or possibly, a scheme of someone hidden within that Guild, who was from the 'questionable' species.

Sae-Jin was sure of the latter option being true. It was only two weeks ago that Vampires tried to ambush him, after all. It was way too close a time frame to call it a coincidence.

But whatever the case may have been, Sae-Jin was still under the danger of being framed. As for his crimes.... he wasn't 100% sure what, but it seemed to be related to taxes.

"So, what's his beef with me?" (Sae-Jin)

"It seems that Kim Hahn-Seol is going to use the Orc Blacksmith's income tax rates. Until now, the Orc Blacksmith maintained anonymity and used us here in the Society to do business. The problem rises from the fact that the Society's income tax rates and that of the Blacksmith's preferential income tax rates are clearly different, to begin with."

It was true – Sae-Jin did hear that the tax rates for Blacksmiths were lower, in order to 'encourage' more to join the profession.

"Right now, we've been applying the Society's tax rates. But before the Society grew to its current size, we calculated taxes of all proceeds from the sales of the Orc's wares according to the Blacksmith's preferential rates and the rest were deposited into the bank account opened under the Society Chairman's name. That is the most worrisome point at the moment."

Sae-Jin was developing a migraine just listening to this. But being dragged through mud was irritating to him even more. The race of Lycanthropes could not stand being on the receiving end. Honestly, even Sae-Jin was getting really furious right now.

"...What can we do about it?"

"That is... I apologise, but we can't think of a response for this. Even if we forego this Blacksmith's preferential tax rates and pay up the shortfall, that in turn will be seen as a tacit admittance of your guilt... Plus, with the announcement date for the successful Guild promotion being only a month away, whatever we decide to respond with, it will end up negative for us, sir." (Kim Yu-Sohn)

It seemed that the 1st place holder became a bunch of dirty cowards the moment 2nd place closed in. Sae-Jin clenched his fists tightly. His knuckles cracked loudly.

Of course, there was one way he could think of, that would potentially resolve this issue. Most likely, Kim Yu-Sohn also must

have thought about it as well. Only that, as Sae-Jin was rather sensitive towards this topic, the veteran Mercenary hadn't mentioned it yet in consideration.

"...Looks like it can't be helped, then. If the news breaks, then I'll reveal that I'm the Orc Blacksmith. However – if it can be blocked somehow, please give it your all."

"I'll do my best."

"Fuu... Yes. By the way, there is something else."

Sae-Jin let out a sigh. His heated breath was full of his boiling rage.

At first, he wanted to use the moderate way. Rather than dragging Kim Hahn-Seol down, he'd rather choose to forcefully push Yu Baek-Song up instead. But now...

"Let's do our own background investigation now. Not only Kim Hahn-Seol, but several of his backers as well – it's time for payback."

The 'Intelligence Agency' that was established within the shadows of the Monster Mercenary Company now boasted over 130 agents. Most of them happened to be Cat-type Soo-ins, and according to Kim Yu-Sohn, there were three of them that were good enough to be inserted into a complicated information warfare.

Obviously, it'd be too much to expect these agents to uncover top secret information erased from the records by the leaders of the current administration, but conversely, finding out about faults of a handful of people would be easier than snatching candy from a baby. And as long as those faults were uncovered, the public and the media will do the follow-up and bury them alive.

Rather obviously, the media people would choose to side with the stronger party so the whole affair might become a battle between the behind-the-scenes backers. But it'd never be a war.

They would never be able to figure out who was attacking Kim Hahn-Seol. And, what would happen under the situation where Kim Hahn-Seol's substitute was already set in stone, someone who could swear her loyalty and obedience, on the surface at least, and also possessing twice the ability? Namely, Yu Baek-Song?

Which choice would they make? Whether to hold onto a walking political liability with heavy losses stacked against him, or to kick him to the curb and embrace a cleanly polished and beautiful pearl, instead?

It was painfully obvious.

Kim Sae-Jin couldn't wait to meet Kim Hahn-Seol two days from now.

< 26. Truth? (4) > Fin.

Chapter 91: Truth? (5)

"You are not doing it, for real? But you've been appearing on TV shows a lot lately... why only not this one? This one's recording time is also short, too..." (Yu Sae-Jung)

A certain Summer afternoon.

As Sae-Jin was under strain from his complicated problem, Yu Sae-Jung came around holding a script from a TV talk show and started whining on and on.

"Plus, you'd be appearing together with me..." (Yu Sae-Jung)

The culprit was the sudden invitation coming from the so-called couple's talk show.

"It should be nice for both of us, you know? That's because..."

"Sae-Jung."

Unable to endure anymore, Sae-Jin finally called out to her in a low voice.

"Mm, hmm?"

Yu Sae-Jung's body trembled for a second, then. Not even looking at her, Sae-Jin sighed out grandly while massaging his temples.

"...Let's, let's talk about it later. I'm really busy right now." (Sae-Jin)

"With what..."

...With what work?

However, Yu Sae-Jung couldn't finish her question. His facial expression and his current body language showed how truly bothered he was by her presence here.

She could only gaze at him with her lips tightly shut. He looked so cold and indifferent right now, concentrating on those documents in his hands.

It wasn't only this time, either. She could feel it on her skin, how much he was bothered by her. Even though Sae-Jin had denied it, without a doubt, he had changed.

"...Then, I should get going."

However, she just could not say anything resentful towards him. She knew all too well who held all the answers in this relationship, after all.

Suddenly, she felt regret. Back then, back when Sae-Jin couldn't suppress his desires anymore – she should have just let him embrace her...

Feeling remorseful, Yu Sae-Jung grasped the door handle.

"Wait."

She heard Sae-Jin from her back. Her heavy emotions reverted back ever-so-subtly, and the strength gripping the door handle automatically left her, just like that.

"...Sae-Jung."

Whenever she heard her name being spoken out from his lips, she felt herself flutter. Sae-Jung turned around, her face slightly reddened.

"There's something I'd like to talk to you about."

" "

However, at his follow-up words, her face hardened slightly, instead.

He wanted to talk to her. Kim Sae-Jin often beat around the bush like this, whenever he needed the Dawn's aid in something.

"What is it? I... always welcome it."

But for her, even being used by him was okay. Because that meant he needed her. Didn't that mean there was a chance of

things developing further? All she had to do was to work harder to develop the relationship, right?

"Please, come sit in front of me for a while."

Kim Sae-Jin smiled deeply and pointed at the chair in front.

*

Several quiet days passed by, as if they were proverbial calm before the incoming storm.

Yu Sae-Jung said that she'd do what she could, but she also cautioned him it would not be easy, either. After all, the moment the Dawn gets involved, then its rival corporations would probably jump into the fray as well.

In other words, it was not possible to prevent the news from breaking out.

And so, while he was mired in many different things, the Goblin village was continuing to grow from strength to strength. Now, it was big enough to be called an underground town.

"...That is some sight to behold, isn't it?"

Kim Sae-Jin broke out in a hollow chuckle, while looking at Goblins playing the sport of jokgu with their short legs and small bodies. These creatures were spending the sweet downtime earned after eight hours of labour exactly like humans would. (TL: Jokgu is a Korean team sport which combines aspects of 'association football' and 'volleyball'. Google it if you're curious.)

Checking them out every now and then, Sae-Jin thought their actions were rather adorable, somehow. Such as, one Goblin who had failed to receive the ball was scratching the back of its neck while looking embarrassed.

...In all honesty, Sae-Jin wasn't expecting to find more about the fact that Goblins possessed the highest IQ and EQ among all the Monsters out there like this.

"I taught them the sport. I thought it was a pity that their current living pattern only consisted of eating and sleeping." (Kim Yu-Sohn)

"It's a good idea. Seeing how fat those potion-making Goblins are now, looks like things are going well that side – but, what about the Witchcraft Goblins, though?"

The potential usages of the Witchcraft Goblins were truly enormous. Those Witchcraft techniques that were already known to the rest of the world, including the likes of 'restraints,', 'detection', 'protection', etc, etc, they were pretty much the same as very useful magic spells.

Also, it was possible to transfer knowledge via blood thanks to Goblin's species-specific Trait. In other words, all those techniques created by the Witchcraft Goblins would become his, pretty soon.

"Well, they are doing their best, but... the results aren't too encouraging at this point in time. It seems that the absence of a leader figure is playing a role here."

"Is that so?"

Well, even the so-called transferring of knowledge was actually the Chieftain passing it onto a subordinate Witchcraft Goblin, after all.

Just as Sae-Jin was about to lick his lips in regret, both his and Yu-Sohn's phones began ringing at the same time.

That sure was ominous. Two of them stared at each other briefly, before rushing towards the surface.

*

– The crime of tax evasion by The Monster's Chairman, Kim Sae-Jin has now been uncovered. The amount is \$46 million USD, proceeds from the sales of weapons...

The day before the scheduled meeting with the minister, the

news finally broke. As expected, it had to do with his tax.

As if everything was arranged ahead of time, the news spread around rapidly, and the meeting with the minister was duly cancelled – leading to this second news item, which went like, 'Kim Sae-Jin insults a government minister' or some such.

'So, he wasn't even planning to meet in the first place, huh.'

Also, he now understood why Kim Hahn-Seol asked Kim Yu-Rin to investigate him.

[Meanwhile, the Special Investigation Division received reports from the National Tax Service and members of The Monster...]

Above was a single excerpt from the article that occupied the upper sections of the portal site search results.

This one sentence had an enormous ripple impact on the public.

Of course, although it seemingly had nothing to do with his tax problem, it was not a lie that someone did make a report. So, even if Kim Yu-Rin and Yi Hye-Rin tried to clear up the air belatedly, all the news publication had to say was, 'reporters made a mistake while rushing the story out'.

If Kim Sae-Jin didn't know what was actually going on, then his Society members would end up being alienated from one another here.

Just like now.

"...I, I didn't say anything slanderous to anyone... I'm, I'm telling the truth!!" (Yi Hye-Rin)

Yi Hye-Rin trembled heavily as she entered Sae-Jin's office. He also heard that Kim Yu-Rin was hurriedly making her way towards the HQ at the moment as well.

"Only thing I reported on was what I saw you, the Chairman's, daily routines, and I've never even mentioned anything related to t, tax matters..." (Yi Hye-Rin)

"I know."

It was his first time seeing her this unsettled and fearful, so Sae-Jin gently tapped her on the shoulder to calm her down.

"I already know that this event is some bastards scheming to screw me over, so please, do not worry. I've already begun searching for the ones behind this plot."

He had already sent the 'Linked-up' Apostle Rhosradel into the ranks of Vampires, while his agents were working tirelessly to gather more than enough dirt on Kim Hahn-Seol and his backers to bury them away.

So, it was only a matter of time before the backlash slaps them in the face.

"If, if that's the case, then... Ah!! Miss Kim Yu-Rin is not that kind of person either."

"I also know that, very well."

When he asked Yu-Rin as the Hero Orc just before this incident broke out, she said, "I should do this instead of someone else, so there won't be any distortion of facts". That showed that she believed in him. It was that, she too had become a victim simply by following the order to the letter.

"If it's not explained away properly, there might be a big blow to our public image."

Kim Sae-Jin formed a smile deliberately. Whether it was truth or not, matters related to taxes were a sensitive topic to the public at large.

Plus, the situation was now at the point where several news articles were writing utter garbage, that he was exploiting the Orc Blacksmith...

"Miss Kim Yu-Rin has arrived."

Jo Hahn-Sung quickly informed Sae-Jin.

As soon as Kim Yu-Rin arrived, every member of the Society as well as its 'think tank' gathered and began discussing emergency countermeasures. But, it was just impossible to refute every accusation thrown at their way.

During the time he lived the double life as the Human Kim Sae-Jin and the Orc Blacksmith, he wasn't meticulous with keeping his secrets all the time. There were times when he didn't pay attention, such as when his Society was at its infancy, and these bastards were exploiting this.

And now, some employees present during this meeting, who had no clue that Sae-Jin was the Orc Blacksmith, ended up saying that although this whole thing was a mistake, a few parts here and there did sound like tax evasion to them.

Also, only after three hours passed since the 'breaking' of the news, the media did something they were well known to do every now and then; they assumed that he did defraud on his tax and began reporting as such. Seeing the number of comments shoot past twenty thousand, Sae-Jin again realised the importance of his Society, The Monster, in this world.

Whatever the case may have been, with the current situation as it was, even if they demand a retraction from the media outlets, that would take a figurative forever to happen. In the meantime, the public images of Sae-Jin and his Society would hit rock bottom. That was why, there was only one method that could solve this chaos and reverse those negative media perception and their articles.

It was to reveal that Sae-Jin was the Orc Blacksmith.

The sole reason why he maintained the double identity was to preemptively prevent unnecessary rumours and questions from potentially spreading around. After all, the method 'the ORK' utilised in crafting weapons wasn't something he could reveal to the public, thanks to how different it was compared to other blacksmiths.

And now that things had devolved this far, his reasoning had become somewhat pointless.

The moment he comes clean, there was a chance that the media and the public would become incredibly curious as to just what kind of Trait Sae-Jin had. Surely, there would be those who would outright ask him about it, too.

...And then, he also kind of felt embarrassed about this as well. Although he had no choice but to keep his circumstances as a secret, others might think of him being impertinent and arrogant in playing a game of deception like this.

"For now, I've clarified my position, saying that there was no such thing in my report.... But the chaos has grown so big already and... I won't offer you any excuses. I'm truly sorry." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin lowered her head in a distressed expression. Whether it was because of the order from above or not, it was true that she did investigate his background, after all.

"It's fine. It's fine so please, don't beat yourself up with this. For now..."

There wasn't much choice left. His head hurt way too much for a meeting like this one, and he even felt irritation bubbling up at all those reports and comments appearing in real time as well.

"Please call for a press conference." (Sae-Jin)

*

On a clear afternoon.

Countless reporters, cameras and news vans from TV stations crowded on a garden located within The Monster's grounds, designated as the spot for the press conference.

As an aside, this conference was being broadcast live to the rest of

the country as well.

"...Did he really defraud on his tax?" (Unknown reporter 1)

"Since this whole thing is complicated, it does sound questionable, but I think he did it. But more than that, I'm more curious about the relationship between the Orc Blacksmith and Kim Sae-Jin." (Unknown reporter 2)

"Yeah, me too. Just what made the Orc use someone like Kim Sae-Jin as his intermediary? To the point where he poured all his earnings to the Society, even?" (Unknown reporter 1)

"I don't know. I mean, we know there is this Orc Blacksmith, but we don't have any concrete details about him, right? That preferential tax thing was awarded solely because of his participation in the Blacksmith Open tournament, no? So, well, there are lots of whisperings that they are actually half brothers, or that the Orc is a slave, that he's from different species, etc, etc.... But since he said all will be revealed today, let's take a proper look, shall we?" (Unknown reporter 2)

Reporters were busy chatting away among themselves, their conversations full of curiosity.

While they were occupied like so, two female Knights from the Raven Order made their appearance – the two who were suspected to be the ones who have made those so-called reports.

Camera flashes went off like crazy and questions were thrown at their way, but the two simply said, "we've already clarified our positions so go and print retractions first" and headed to the empty seats out in the front row prepared for them.

And so, another twenty minutes went by, with only five more remaining before the press conference was scheduled to commence.

The tension ran quite high; reporters and camera crews waited with bated breaths for the arrival of Kim Sae-Jin to the stage.

"He's coming!"

Set off by an unknown person's shout, camera flashes went off once more, and all of the cameras focused on one place. Kim Sae-Jin, decked out in a formal business suit, walked like a cool supermodel.

Carrying a stiff face, he stood on the prepared stage. And then, after letting out a single fake cough, he said...

"Tax evasion. Although there have been some misunderstandings here, it is categorically untrue."

That was his opening line.

Right away, camera flashes exploded and questions that sounded like roars of wild animals spread around.

"What is your reasoning for that?"

"But the National Tax Agency is certain of..."

"There are rumours that you listed the Dawn's aid to squash this allegation altogether. Do you not feel any guilt on your conscience?"

There could not be anything more torturous than this on his auditory and visual senses that were so much sharper after his evolution to the Lycanthrope.

"Please, calm down first..."

Sae-Jin closed his eyes and gestured the reporters to slow down first. And then, he quickly seized the small gap between the frenzy of the reporters to continue with his words.

"A lot of people are curious about the Orc Blacksmith's identity."

He produced a document from the bag carried on his side.

This was the relic of the past when the Orc Blacksmith first made his debut – the application form for the Blacksmith Open Tournament that was returned to him as the proof of his participation. Although there were no fingerprints on it, there were a signature and the return address written on it.

"This is the application form from the time when the Orc applied to participate in the Open Tournament. At the time, when the Orc was guarding his identity even more fiercely compared to today, the address written on it shows the post office in Gangwon Province."

Ignoring the continuously exploding camera flashes, he then lifted up the scanned paper that detailed the beginning of all the transactions taken place so far.

"You'll see that the Orc had never used his own name. Everything was done with me, Kim Sae-Jin, as the proxy. Since the complication with the preferential tax arises from this, I'm guessing the main issue is with this part, yes?

"Also, I see that there is another point that has caused a great deal of confusion, that has led to you raising many questions regarding the matter. Why would the Orc Blacksmith use me, Kim Sae-Jin, as a proxy, someone who is an orphan and has not much of a background? Is he really a slave that simply hands over all of his creations?"

Sae-Jin let out a lengthy sigh.

"To be clear, he's not a slave, nor did he appoint me as his proxy."

Reporters only then began remembering that unrealistic story in their heads. That urban legend of Kim Sae-Jin being one and the same as the Orc Blacksmith.

All of them believed that, although sounding feasible, that story was simply nonsensical. No, it was an impossibility. In order to produce weapons of the Orc's calibre, it just wasn't enough to dedicate oneself on walking down the lonely path of the blacksmiths.

"Let me clarify further."

Sae-Jin breathed in deeply and surveyed the surroundings. He saw the faces of the deeply shocked people. Among them included Kim Yu-Rin, Yi Hye-Rin and Joo Ji-Hyuk. It was understandable, really, since Sae-Jin hadn't told them the truth until now.

"I am the Orc Blacksmith."

He thought there would be explosions of flashes. However, everything was quiet.

These reporters had no room left to start snapping his pictures, after all.

< 26. Truth? (5) > Fin.

(TL: I just had to insert the first Iron Man movie reference at the end there. I just had to. That last scene always gives me goosebumps. It's so good...)

Chapter 92: Progression (1)

"I am the Orc Blacksmith."

This declaration caused the Korean peninsula as well as the whole world to boil over. Since the fame of the Orc Blacksmith was already widespread throughout the planet, Kim Sae-Jin had become the hottest topic in the world.

Joo Ji-Hyuk, Yi Hye-Rin and Kim Yu-Rin as well as those members of the Society and acquaintances who had no idea fell into quite a huge vortex of shock; meanwhile, reactions from the local media and the public were quite varied and colourful, to say the least. Among them, were people who couldn't just believe it, some who were utterly amazed by it, and some who criticised and condemned him.

But what hurt him the most were those critical opinions of some that began with, "just how much enjoyment and sense of superiority did he derive while hiding his identity?"

Sae-Jin felt so, so embarrassed. He obviously had a valid reason why he had to conceal his identity, but whenever he read those articles, cold perspiration formed on his backside while his head went numb.

- "All the information has been compiled, but... it seems that, for now, it'll be better for us to wait, sir." (Kim Yu-Sohn)

While all this was happening, enough dirt on Kim Hahn-Seol and his backers had been uncovered – the information on all the corrupt things he did in order to achieve his ambitions. Although over half of those crimes were well past the statute of limitations, but well, mass media wouldn't sweat over stuff like that.

"Right. We wait."

Unfortunately, the huge chaos raised by Sae-Jin's press conference meant that it was not possible to bury this story with another one, not just yet.

The current situation had devolved to the point where even the most respected newspapers and weekly publications – such as The Guardian, the Times, etc, etc – were busy tripping over one another just to get the story out first, while the rest of news items were getting buried away in ignorance. It was likely that, even if he exposed this information, it'd get ignored just like the others.

"This chaos, it might carry on for a while, right?"

- "Yes, sir. It seems that way. Even if you hold more press conferences, this chaos won't die down, so perhaps it's better for you to take a couple of weeks of good rest, sir." (Kim Yu-Sohn)

"A good rest... Fuu-woo."

Kim Sae-Jin let out a grand sigh while staring outside his window. As there was no sign of the noise created by the huge crowd of reporters right outside his house lessening any time soon, having a good rest was simply an impossibility at the moment.

- "Oh, and Guild Master?"
- "...Yes?"
- "Last night, I had a dream. It was seen from the eyes of a Vampire. And in the dream, the Vampire Lord is waking up."

The moment he heard those words, he swallowed down a lot of his saliva. Out of the blue, the Skill 'Eyes of the Wolf' activated all on its own, and his claws extended out sharply. His heart powerfully urged him on, strengthening the species-specific instincts.

"...How do we kill it?"

He muttered out without realising it. It was a simple, instinctive reaction.

- "...Sir?"
- "Ah, it's nothing. I'll call you back later."

Regaining his sanity back thanks to Kim Yu-Sohn's panicked voice, Sae-Jin quickly hung up the phone. However, his madly pounding heart showed no signs of slowing down at all. And those d**n reporters camping outside his house, making so much noise were only serving to irritate him even more.

"...Uh-whew."

He let out another sigh and picked up his phone again. No matter what it took, he had to find a solution to these f*cking bastards outside who were preventing him from getting much-needed sleep.

"...Oh, is it you, Sae-Jung?"

The call connected even before the second ring ended. From the other side, he could hear a genuinely welcoming voice.

*

For a week after the press conference, Sae-Jin shut himself in the house. He refused every single interview request made by both the local and international media outlets while saying, "Later".

Instead, testimonies of people witnessing a strange Monster began emerging between the articles related to Sae-Jin every now and then, before promptly getting buried away once more.

The unidentified Monster, its moonlight-coloured fur shining so beautifully – yet, leaving behind only the dark silhouette when the eyes try to locate it.

What the witnesses saw was the sight of the creature kicking and gliding in the air, leaping between buildings and mountains like a bird. Although, it was nothing more than a moment's blur, for those 'Knights' who accidentally saw it, they just could not forget that mysterious Monster.

Of course, the culprit himself couldn't care any less even if he tried. He had to feel the wind on his face just to de-stress, like now – so why would he care about what others thought of him and become careful with his actions? That just didn't fit with his

current personality.

"...Hmm."

Currently, Sae-Jin was in the 'Wolf' form, while sitting atop the peak of a mountain in the Monster field, studying the land below.

The newly-improved Wolf's field of view simply knew no limits and he could see not only the countless Monsters, but also the Knights doing their nightly hunts as well. And even the flow of Mana coming off from them could not escape his vision, either.

"*Yawn*~~"

Since none of them were Vampires, he had no interest in fighting any one of those weaklings. While yawning out, he flicked his claw out and that cancelled the magic spell of a Lich that was fighting a group of Knights afar.

Sae-Jin climbed down the mountain peak after confirming that the Knights, who briefly stopped their actions from the shock in order to figure out why the magic had been cancelled, rushing into the Lich to finish the Monster off.

Done with his stroll now, Sae-Jin returned to the cabin owned by Yu Sae-Jung.

The cabin that was located deep in the woods of Gangwon's Goseong-gun easily exceeded 7000 square feet in area alone, but it was still nothing more than one of the simple weekend getaway villas with a nice view Yu Sae-Jung owned. Actually, she didn't even know there was a place like this under her name until her butler informed her so.

And Kim Sae-Jin asked for Yu Sae-Jung's favour and as a result, ended up staying in this villa for the time being.

He couldn't help it, since his own house was virtually under siege at the moment, and it was also no better within the Society's grounds as that was completely open to the public; reporters had hidden themselves in the hotel and the theme park located there. Of course, he could stay cooped up within the nap room of the HQ building, or even in the underground village, but changing to the Wolf or other Monster Forms there obviously caused problems, and also, he definitely didn't feel like living with Goblins in the underground village where sun literally didn't shine.

It didn't matter that he came here with a variety of reasons, because this place proved to be just perfect. The villa was located in the middle of a mountain, so not a single sign of people anywhere; as it was also right next to a lake, the air here was refreshing, too; most of all, there were no prying eyes to worry about.

However, the one thing he didn't fully expect, obviously...

"Oppa, where have you been?"

It was Yu Sae-Jung.

She approached him shyly while wearing a thin shirt with her black underwear peeking out a little and a really short hotpants. As if she had taken a shower just now, her cheeks were glowing and her hair moist.

"A stroll. But besides that, you still haven't gone home yet? You said you'd be here for a couple of days, tops." (Sae-Jin)

"...But this is my home already." (Yu Sae-Jung)

She was the sole reason why he simply had to establish the routine of going out on a 'stroll' as the Lycanthrope for the past four days. He could only stay as a 'human' for 15 hours; so, as long as Yu Sae-Jung was around the house, he had to roam around outside for the rest 9.

"Just what kind of a stroll lasts that long?"

"Because I want to? But forget about that for now – when is Mister Hyun-Oh coming? Isn't Mister Joo Ji-Hyuk coming here soon as well? Please call them and find out what's happening. My phone died a sudden and horrible death not too long ago."

"Oh, really? But uh, even I can't... maybe something happened? I'm sure they are also busy doing all those interviews."

Yu Sae-Jung locked into his eyes and lied with a straight face. She had already sent text messages that read, 'do not come. I can handle it', and well... she didn't want Sae-Jin to know. After all, she was utterly determined to make things happen here.

"I've readied breakfast. Let's go and eat."

She then held Sae-Jin's hand and guided him towards the dining table.

*

"How is it? Good?"

Yu Sae-Jung asked him while her eyes sparkled in hope.

"...Let me eat first."

Unfortunately for her, he only just finished scooping out a spoonful of stir-fried rice and it wasn't even anywhere near his mouth yet.

Here was the reason why his stay here the last four days was comfortable and uncomfortable all at the same time.

From 9 o'clock in the evening to 6 in the morning, he had to roam outside for 9 hours in total which meant that his sleeping hours didn't line up with hers – but the rising hours did, so Yu Sae-Jung prepared breakfast and they always ate together.

It was the same during the day as well. Since there wasn't much to do, they would spar occasionally, then watch some TV, and then talk about trivial stuff for a while. Meanwhile, Yu Sae-Jung would stealthily approach him and engage in 'skinship' – such as, leaning her head on his shoulders, or using his lap as a pillow.

Whenever that happened... Kim Sae-Jin didn't stop her.

"Mm. It's salty."

He chewed the fried rice for a bit before ruthlessly handing out his judgement. After his evolution to Lycanthrope, even his taste buds had sharpened up and most regular food just didn't taste good enough for him nowadays.

"Ah?! Really?"

Panicking a little, she quickly took a mouthful of the rice. According to her own tongue, it wasn't bad at all, but still...

"...Ah, you weren't kidding... It's an honest mistake. Sorry. Should I redo it?"

"No, it's fine. Don't worry about it, really."

Well, it wasn't as if he'd chase after delicious food for the rest of his life, anyways. Sae-Jin shoved all the fried rice down his throat in a hurry. And his plate became empty in less than three minutes, all the while Yu Sae-Jung gazed at him with a deeply moved expression.

"...*Buuurrrp.*"

And then, he burped out loudly. But well, as the love-struck mind possessed power to transform even things like that into something utterly cool, Yu Sae-Jung burst out into a fit of giggles, commenting on how honest he was.

After the meal had come to an end, Yu Sae-Jung followed Sae-Jin as he headed towards the door again.

"I'm heading out for a while."

"Uh? But it's only 11 now? And you just came back not too long ago..."

Yu Sae-Jung asked with a surprised face. The repeat broadcast of a talk show he starred in would be on air pretty soon...

"I'll be back at 5 o'clock."

Kim Sae-Jin didn't say much, only smiling gently at her while standing on the doorway.

That was enough to appease her unhappiness of his sudden departure. Indeed, Yu Sae-Jung said goodbye with a smile much wider than his.

*

His schedule today was simple. He planned to roam the Monster field in all of his Monster Forms, and if he ran into a strong-looking Monster, then he'd kill it and absorb its Mana Stone. Then, he would meet up with Kim Yu-Sohn on the appointed time here in the field and have a chat with him, before changing into the Hero Orc and head off to the Orc village.

'Hmm... They have grown big.'

Sae-Jin felt accomplished whenever he took in the sights of the Hero Orc village that had clearly grown into a town. Although it wasn't cool to hear all those pig-like squeals coming out from this place instead of the Korean he taught them before, but still, this village had become a home where these mild-mannered Orcs could live safely.

They had divided their roles clearly, the huts built by the Orcs themselves were more than passable, and there seemed to be more than 300 households here – seeing all these Orcs and their growth, he started sensing the feelings of joy creep up on his mind.

It was then. An unexpected alert window popped up at this completely unexpected moment.

[Condition complete: the mindset of a Chieftain (2/3)]

- Upon completion of one more condition, the host will evolve into the Orc Chieftain.
- A container where warriors' souls can dwell has been created in the host's body. Maximum of (1~5) souls of Monsters killed in battle can be stored, depending on the strength of the Monster. The Monster souls will add varied bonus Stat points to the host's overall power depending on the original holder.

"...Mm?"

The Orc tilted his head.

As he was checking out the alert window with a surprised face, the gates of the village creaked open and a person entered.

It was Kim Yu-Rin. It was as if she was also a resident in this place, judging by her familiarity.

She didn't carry any particular expression, only to find the Hero Orc and her whole face brightened up, quickly strolling towards where he was.

"But, no sparring today?"

The Hero Orc kept his distance and narrowed his brows. Yu-Rin then faintly smiled while pointing at her back pocket.

"I know. It's just that, there are couple of Orcs who got injured while going out on a hunt. I brought along some potions to treat them."

""

The Orc stared at her with a complicated expression. Her words implied that she had been often looking after these Orcs until now.

A woman who took care of Monsters. The press would have a field day if they ever found out.

"In other words, yes, it means that I don't have any interest in you. On top of that, we Raven Knights Order has decided to protect this village from poachers, too."

Completely forgetting about her uber-bright expressions of only a few seconds ago, she tried to look totally indifferent while walking past the Orc.

The Orc chuckled to himself slightly and turned around to follow her.

"...Hey, he's following me?"

Kim Yu-Rin's lips quivered after she took a quick glance at her back.

She thought that, the 'pushing and pulling' tactic had been a success.

< 27. Progression (1) > Fin.

Chapter 93: Progression (2)

Kim Sae-Jin spent his time sparring with and taking care of other Orcs together with Kim Yu-Rin, here in the village. Since Orcs were naturally drawn towards powerful individuals, so in his eyes, she had become quite a charming woman, which led to him forgetting about the passage of time; and it was already very late at night when they finally separated.

"Oh yeah~. It's all good..."

The clear illumination from the full moon high up on the dark and cloudless night sky coolly bathed the ground below.

While savouring the brilliance of the falling moonlight, Sae-Jin moved his feet. The light seemed to linger on with every footstep he left behind.

" "

And before he knew it, his dazed stroll brought him back to the villa. There seemed to be an aura of loneliness creeping around this huge house with all of its lights off.

He grabbed the door handle and slowly pushed forward.

SFX for noisy hinges

Past the cold, indifferent noise, he saw the wide open living room. Now that he saw it in the darkness, he realised just how unnecessarily huge this place was.

Tthak-

When he closed the door, he sensed a person's presence, towards the living room's couch. Was she pretending to be asleep, or did he wake her up just now? Grinning slightly, he approached Yu Sae-Jung on the couch.

"...Are you awake?" (Sae-Jin)

Yu Sae-Jung didn't even budge, her face deeply buried in the

cushions of the couch. Since he could hear her heartbeat increasing rapidly, she was indeed faking it, but was she angry at him being so late?

"...Hmph."

Unfortunately for her, Sae-Jin simply chose to go to his room instead. He didn't feel like humouring her at all if he could help it...

"Eu-eum... Oppa, you came back?"

At the same time, Yu Sae-Jung slowly raised her head up. She pretended to be woken up just now by keeping her eyes half-shut, while reaching out and holding his wrist tightly.

"Were you asleep?" (Sae-Jin)

"Mm. Because, the guy who said he'd be back by 5... hadn't come until 1 in the morning, you see."

""

He sat down on the couch and while smiling apologetically, brushed her hair.

Maybe the moonlight pouring down in the darkness was to blame, but for some reason, she looked especially pretty today. On top of this, she even exuded this unfamiliar sensuality as well. Half-open eyes, deeply blushing cheeks, and most of all, a very suggestive attire she had on. She was wearing only a thin one-piece night gown and whenever she moved her body, Sae-Jin could spy on the sight of her unexpectedly rich cleavage.

"...Why were you so late? You said you'd be home early." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Inside this darkened room, she continued to speak, her voice sounding weak.

"There was this thing I had to take care of, and I ended up being a little late." (Sae-Jin)

"It's not 'a little' but 'a lot'. Let's get that straight." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Yu Sae-Jung complained as she interlocked her fingers with his. Since he felt apologetic, he didn't offer any resistance, and she kept on playing with his hands.

"By the way, Oppa. Did you know? It's already been over two years since we first met."

As if it came to her just now, she mentioned this fact 'in passing'.

"It's been that long?" (Sae-Jin)

"We met during the early spring, 2nd year of high school, and I'm twenty now, so yeah, it just about checks out."

After thinking back for a bit, Sae-Jin suddenly broke out in short laughter.

"I remember now. You were quite rude back then. You seemed so expectant but when I introduced myself as a Hunter, your face became really distorted..."

"N, no way... I, I may have behaved like that before, but I was naïve back then. Now, I'm a lot... different? I get to hear a lot nowadays that my personality has changed, you know? It's all because of you, Oppa."

"Now? Hmm..."

He feigned falling into a deep dilemma, and sure enough, Yu Sae-Jung began throwing a tantrum, telling him to stop teasing her.

"What? Your first impression of me was that I was an impolite girl?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"No, an impolite rich girl."

"...Hah."

And so, from those simple and ill-timed words, the pleasant memories began to bloom brightly in their minds.

When the two of them met for the first time, when they went out on a hunt together, when Kim Sae-Jin 'revealed' his identity to her, etc, etc... Time quickly flowed as they talked and soon, they had arrived at the day of Yu Sae-Jung's coming of age ceremony.

"And when Oppa tried to take advantage of me..." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Mm? Oh, uh, at the time I was..."

"Let me finish first. Back then, I said I'd wait until Oppa truly likes me from the depth of your heart and left, right? I was such a world-class moron back then, you know?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

She then stopped her words, and as if she had decided on something, got right next to him while swallowing down her saliva.

"That night when I was leaving, I was like, I am so cool, can't you see... But, from the following week since then, I've been regretting it. Every night when I try to sleep, I regret what I've done, I kick away my duvet, and then regret that instead... Oppa knows this too, don't you? That I like Oppa a lot. I just couldn't stand it when I think about that great chance I messed up."

As the atmosphere turned a bit 'strange', Sae-Jin ended up scratching the blameless cheeks of his; meanwhile, Yu Sae-Jung took a deep breath.

"That's why, I'm going to say this out aloud. I really, really don't think I can wait for Oppa anymore. Can't you just help me somehow?"

""

"Well, look. I'm exaggerating a bit but I dream of dreams with Kim Sae-Jin in them seven days a week. And in them, when Kim Sae-Jin hates me, it turns into a nightmare, and if he likes me, then it's the sweetest dream there can be."

Kim Sae-Jin didn't say a word while hearing her calm and composed confession – because, he could definitely sense her ardent feelings for him contained within her trembling voice.

"And when Oppa meets with another woman, even though I don't say anything, things become really difficult for me. I struggle to fall asleep that night, and I have nightmares, too."

While she gazed at him, Yu Sae-Jung did her best to disguise her restlessness with a smile.

"...So, that's why, can't we... maybe start seeing each other? I... I heard from Hye-Rin Unni that people do fall in love while dating."

As she peered into his eyes, her heart beat away like crazy in her chest.

"Even if Oppa is not ready, I'll... try harder. Honestly... isn't it true that you won't find other woman like me anywhere else, right?"

She cautiously and clearly spoke all the words she wanted to say to him until now during this opportunity.

However – Kim Sae-Jin maintained his silence. And Yu Sae-Jung's body quivered from the fear of being rejected.

A thick silence descended on the living room, accompanied by the heavy moonlight.

Five minutes passed by, and then, ten.

Yu Sae-Jung could not endure this silence anymore, and so, completely disregarding whatever consequences there could be, threw herself aggressively into his arms.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and planted her lips on his. Although she had jumped in without a thought for what would happen next, her lips were still quivering from that fear of rejection.

But fortunately for her, Sae-Jin did not push her away. No, he gently wrapped his arms around her waist, instead. That gave her the confidence and ever so slightly, she slid her tongue between his

lips.

Their tongues intertwined, wetting each other's mouths.

Unlike Yu Sae-Jung who only learned about romance through novels, Sae-Jin was much more accomplished with his kisses. Of course, he too didn't have any experience, but he simply let the instincts of the Lycanthrope, the creature well versed in the pursuit of all things pleasurable, take over the proceedings.

While their lips were locked tight, he touched her through the gown. He felt the silkiness of her skin and the perfect curvature of her body through the thin fabric. As expected of a Knight, her body was firm and smooth.

"Ha, ah..."

She breathed out restlessly and actively writhed her body, so he could touch her even more. And before long, the hand touching her gown began to dig into her bare flesh.

"...Fuu-woo..."

The more he desired her, the more she clung onto him. She breathed hotly near his ear, as if to fan the flames of his urges even more.

And to show that she had succeeded, Sae-Jin's suddenly became a lot more harsher. He didn't simply undress her, he ripped the thin gown off and then began leaving behind his marks all over her bare flesh as if he was conquering her.

"...Ouch!"

She felt a great deal of pain, as if an untamed animal was biting her, but she endured it. But even such pain was temporary. Her awakening body replaced all the painful parts into zones of pleasure.

• •

The time, two in the morning. When the moon was at her

highest; when, allegedly, people would be at their most vulnerable mindset.

The living room couch became stained with the odd heat and saliva as two people sought to fill the void.

*

He opened his eyes. No, his eyes opened by themselves. A woman had woken him up after continuously squirming within his arms.

""

The world was still dark outside the window.

Kim Sae-Jin looked down on the naked figure in his arms and let out a long sigh. The memories of the deed itself was a bit of blur, but the sensations remained still so real. In the end, his desires won over his reasoning.

'Oh, well...'

However, he quickly shook away the feelings of regret. What's done was done already. Of course, the effects of the full moon had played some part in the things unfolding this way, but really, he had an inkling that things might turn out this way – yet, still ended up setting himself up.

And well, wasn't Sae-Jung a wonderful woman, to begin with? She was pretty, had great abilities, and not to mention, her background could be called the best in South Korea.

"...But why is she making that face?"

A loose smile broke out on Sae-Jin's face.

Yu Sae-Jung's face that showed how happy she was left a deep impression on him. He could tell that she was definitely asleep, yet there was a thick smile on her lips, and he even heard her rhythmic breathing that somehow sounded as if she was singing. Looked like she was enjoying a really good dream...

That appearance of hers proved to be quite alluring, so Sae-Jin

embraced her real tightly. However, a pair of soft sensations directly touching his skin ended up activating his instincts once more.

Again, she was still in a deep slumber. As it was her first time, she must've been exhausted, but... he was thinking that, since she looked so happy, doing it one more time wouldn't be a problem at all.

He assumed a slightly crooked smile and began twisting his body bit by bit. It was time for the second round to begin.

• • •

As an aside, Yu Sae-Jung did wake up in the middle and in an unbridled panic, ended up scratching the hell out of his back.

*

Since then, three weeks went by.

During these three weeks, Sae-Jin got to know intimately just how being newly-weds felt like. They ate together every day and also, made love regardless of time every day as well. Now that he was no longer held back by constraints, he jumped on Yu Sae-Jung whenever he got the chance. So much so, she even stopped counting how many times they did it in a day.

Whenever his instincts took over, he pulled her in like a violent wild beast, but she welcomed him with a wide open smile, instead.

And so, the three weeks of honeymoon came to an end with them becoming official 'lovers' and Kim Sae-Jin left behind a slightly saddened Yu Sae-Jung to make his return.

The thing was, no matter how hot, three weeks were sufficient enough for the news to cool down. Stories related Sae-Jin had gradually faded away, and eyeing this opportunity, he let the proverbial bomb go off.

[Minister in Charge of Monster Affairs, Kim Hahn-Seol: seduced

by the corruption of financial world...]

[Thrice-elected member of the Assembly, Kim Yo-Hahn, illegal campaign funds...]

The information on Kim Hahn-Seol and his backers – Chaebols and National Assembly members – were exposed to the public. And so, the powerful momentum of the winds of revenge began to gather slowly.

- I stake the life I've lived until now - all those reports in the media are untrue!!

Kim Hahn-Seol and his backers showed off the expected response – a categorical denial. They were acting like this with the belief that they could escape out of this predicament – but that was because only a part of the information had been revealed to the public yet. The more they struggled, the deeper their graves would become, however.

"Miss Yu Baek-Song, have you seen the news?"

- "…"

Yu Baek-Song didn't say a word. She was probably trying to remain respectful towards the superior officer she had been taking orders from until now.

"It'll be troublesome for me if you don't reply. After all, I only started this matter because of you, Miss Yu Baek-Song."

- "Hey, why are you saying this thing is for me? I..."

"Let's discuss the details later on when we meet up, as I'm quite busy at the moment. When can we meet?"

- "Huh? Uh, I'm also busy nowadays, so..."

"You don't have anything lined up for July 14th, no? Let's meet on that date."

He could hear her hold her breath over the line. Since he had installed a ton of spyware as well as inserted a few spies in the

midst of the SID, finding out about this much wasn't a problem at all.

- "No, no wait, that's not..."

"Ah, I just received another call. Hold on a sec. I'll call you back some other time."

He confirmed the name shown on the LCD screen and hurriedly changed his conversation partner.

- "Oh, Mister Kim Sae-Jin. It's a relief that you answered your phone. I'm Kim Hahn-Seol. I saw that important announcement three weeks ago with great interest. I have to say, that sure was something else."

The call was from Kim Hahn-Seol. He sounded quite relaxed for a guy whose dirty laundry was hung out to dry for all to see.

"...Yes, well. Thank you."

Kim Sae-Jin also maintained his calm.

- "Huhuh. And that is why, shouldn't we reschedule the cancelled meeting? After all, with the revelation of some unsavoury matters, it could not be helped at the time, no? For you, I've readied quite a few nice little presents, you see."

Kim Sae-Jin stayed silent.

He just had realised it – Kim Hahn-Seol's 'neutral' aura he felt back then was actually this – he was the type of a person who would readily burn his bridges without hesitation if it meant fulfilling his ambitions.

- "Keum. This is actually a secret, but well, I was never really convinced of you being implicated in the tax fraud from the very beginning. Such things don't appear on the surface unless someone wills it, no? That's why I asked one of my close associates to look into the matter."

That was how this man was able to sell off his so-called

comrades. Kim Hahn-Seol probably had felt in his bones, that now was the time he changed the ship he was sailing on.

"...Is that right?"

- "Indeed. And it's definitely a political manoeuvring, this whole ordeal. Since I've uncovered those behind this plot, why don't we meet and share this info..."

Sae-Jin let this rather well-composed pleading enter one ear and flow out the other while carrying a cold smile.

Just how many people did Kim Hahn-Seol betray in this manner as this guy climbed up to his current position?

Hearing this man talk, whatever little speck of sympathy Sae-Jin had disappeared. So, he said some non-committal replies and hung up the phone.

SFX for the doorbell chime

As soon as he ended the call, someone rang his doorbell.

SFX for a door abruptly opening

Even before he could say, "who is it", Yu Sae-Jung opened the door and lightly walked into his house.

"Mister Kim Sae-Jin? Your lover has arrived~."

"...Hah."

Kim Sae-Jin let out a long sigh and stood up, all the while thinking, Is she trying to cause a scandal or something?

*

With the awakening of the ruler of all Vampires, the Vampire Lord, there was no longer a leeway with the time anymore. The decision on who would fill the role of the future ruler of the species had to be made before the current, dying Lord kicked the bucket. And before even that could happen, they had to connect all three Dead Fissures within the Monster field together.

Now pressured by the lack of time, Bathory had no choice but to do something quite rare. And that was to combine the might of her House and that of the 'el Las' House and its leader, the kid named 'Thsironen'. (TL: 트시로넨)

"Hey, kid. Let's be honest here, there isn't enough time for us to wait for you to grow up. So, although we're working together, the position of the Lord shall..." (Prillani Bathory)

"Let's discuss that matter later. As the heads of our respective Houses, we are on the equal position here, after all." (Thisronen el Las)

Bathory gritted her teeth. Honestly, this little tyke was...

"First of all, you can't connect the portals because you don't have the artificial heart anymore, right? While the date our Lord has spoken of is fast approaching as we speak." (el Las)

"...Well, technically, it isn't exactly like that, though?" (Bathory)

"Does that mean you don't need the aid of my people, then? If that's the case, I'll be on my way." (el Las)

"...Now hold it, right there. For now, I'll listen to what you have to say."

The skin and hair that were paler than palest white, and the pair of blood-red eyes that contrasted such paleness – possessing such appearance that even other Vampires would find creepy, Thironen maintained composure even in front of Bathory.

"For now, those Nosferatus are the most suspicious ones so let's combine our powers. Then, we open the portal, and then, we wait for the next command of our Lord. Thankfully, the Lord will be able to extend his life by another six months or so. Let's decide on the rest after everything's been resolved." (el Las)

Bathory's forehead creased. It was like, as if this little tyke had the ambition of becoming the next Lord, and thus, this boy was proving to be difficult to deal with. "...Fuu."

But there was very little she could do, at least for now. Even if it was for a short while, she needed a helper, after her truly incompetent foolish servants had messed up everything.

Also, if she didn't like the way things were going, then...

'I'll just kill this little f*cker.'

Bathory lightly nodded her head.

< 27. Progression (2) > Fin.

Chapter 94: Changes in the Daily Life, part 2 (1)

'Korea's Proud Son.'

That was the title for this week's article on one of the world's most influential publications, the 'Times'.

The main character was Kim Sae-Jin. Describing him as a 'man who possessed a variety of unexplainable abilities', the article went in-depth with introducing the public to the road he had walked on to get to where he was now.

As one would expect from the article focusing solely on Sae-Jin, it brought about a much more explosive amount of reaction from the populace of South Korea, than compared to the USA.

And by riding on the wave of this fame, The Monster passed the Guild evaluation and thus became a full-fledged Guild in the process. Also, the price of the land the 'Guild' was on, as well as the value of the surrounding lands as the tourist attraction, reached heights previously unseen.

Plus, many famous celebrities from different parts of the world personally flew over to Korea in order to meet with Sae-Jin, saying he was someone who could create 'treasures' as the Orc Blacksmith. Hell, there were some individuals who wielded incredible influence in the world resorting to pressuring the government personnel for a chance to meet with him.

Whenever he received these requests for a meeting, though, Sae-Jin checked out that person's personality first. In other words, he didn't meet with everyone. He figured that, if he kept on refusing, then people might start 'hating' on him, and if he met them all, then it'd go on forever.

And so, for the next three weeks or so, Sae-Jin held many meetings with celebrities which started off with him meeting the greatest Knight in the USA named 'Ropetess'; from there, he met the 3rd Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, a world-famous Elf songstress which even made him cower timidly, etc, etc... Sae-Jin got to build personal connections with lots of celebrities. (TL: What the... Just who names their kid "Ropetess"? This author really needs a better naming sense... And yes, I TLed it literally, as written in the raw.)

Initially, meeting up with all these celebrities he saw on TV and newspapers proved to be really cool, but as it continued on and on, both his body and mind became fatigued.

It couldn't be helped, as those who succeeded meeting with Sae-Jin were all very happy, but those who failed to do so were busy slagging him off for being an arrogant prick.

Finally, using the excuse of The Monster becoming a Guild and thus its administration requiring a specialised and dedicated touch, Sae-Jin stepped away from the Guild Master position, while also installing Jo Hahn-Sung as his proxy. He then told everyone that he'd be taking a long break from all the stressful work and began a NEET-like existence in his house, inwardly feeling quite pleased with himself.

Even though there were Knights who were wholeheartedly waiting for the Orc Blacksmith to release new weapons, Sae-Jin decided to let them wait for a while. Most of all, it seemed there were too many idiots who thought that his continued show of 'goodwill' had become their right or some such.

Instead of feeling grateful for him presenting his creations to the public, these bastards were busy spewing c**p like Sae-Jin was getting lazy and lackadaisical and whatever, when he broke the promise of releasing two weapons a month.

It was because of these morons, he decided to rest for at least three months or so. Of course, he'd every now and then post a few smartly-chosen words on his SNS profile, too. "...Hmm."

Anyways. Currently, Sae-Jin was savouring a cup of coffee within his own house, not in the Guild's HQ building, glancing through a newspaper while enjoying the early morning of his sabbatical.

[Kim Hahn-Seol, after saying he'd bet his entire life, resigns from his ministerial position after the continued revelation of corruption.]

[Is the vice chairman of Great Wisdom, Kim Jong-Hyuk, also implicated in this corruption scandal?]

Kim Hahn-Seol – a man resembling an onion with layers upon layers of dark secrets continuously being revealed. It seemed that he'd be seeing the inside of a jail cell in a near future, while his backers were all getting mired in the scandal as well. No matter how one cut it, at this moment in time, one could definitely say that both Sae-Jin and the Dawn Corporation had won this game outright.

[The Divine Beast type Soo-in Yu Baek-Song, appointed as the Commissioner of the Police.]

And the story he had been waiting for, the rise to power of a certain someone, was also printed on the side with small letters.

"It's finally done~."

He put the newspaper down while a satisfied smile showed up on his face. Now, even without him being there, the Guild would run smoothly, although that had been the case since the beginning anyways, and the idiots who didn't know their place were being escorted into a prison one by one, so...

So, there was just one more issue he had to tackle now.

Vampires and his parents, as well as the truth about himself.

"Next week."

Sae-Jin murmured to himself as he looked at the calendar. July

14th, the date he'd meet up with Yu Baek-Song.

Around the same time, he heard the sound of a door opening.

While carrying a smile on his lips, he waited for the woman to enter his arms.

"...You went out on a stroll again?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

Yu Sae-Jung walked in uneasy steps and sat on the couch before falling into his arms. She wore nothing other than a thin shirt over her naked form so the sensation transmitted to Sae-Jin was rather stimulating.

"It's fine going outside while I'm still asleep, but can't you be by my side when I'm about to wake up?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Why don't you get dressed first?"

"Don't wanna."

She replied with a pout and lightly bit his neck.

"Honestly... Where does Oppa go every night? You don't think about me who might wake up in the middle of sleep, right? Do you know how lonely it can get when when two suddenly becomes one?"

""

Now that his guilty conscience got poked, he couldn't say anything so to change the topic, he switched on the TV instead.

- ...This is an emergency alert. Near the city of Youngju, North Gyeongsang Province, the Monster 'Arteramus' has appeared.

Instead, he was greeted with a breaking news. Thankfully, it was a good enough topic to change the flow of this conversation.

"Why is there so much chaos in this country all of a sudden..." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Yu Sae-Jung made a worried expression as she looked on at the emergency broadcast. The news was showing the images of the

bird-type Monster building a nest near the North Gyeongsang Province.

- The body of the Arteramus is believed to be bigger than the entrance to the Dead Fissure that appeared in the North Gyeongsang Province before; the experts have expressed their curiosity as to how such a Monster could exit from that Dead Fissure with its massive bulk.

An Arteramus was famous for being a difficult Monster to deal with. Nay, it transcended the level of merely being 'difficult' and firmly into the realm of impossibility, even.

The first time this thing appeared was around 13 years ago, and the unlucky host that time was Osaka, Japan. Appearing suddenly out of nowhere – as if it fell from the sky or something – this Monster bird used its powerful crow to cause the city to fall in utter chaos, and then using mysterious tentacles that grew on its body instead of fur, killed countless people.

– The Arteramus has been classified as a Boss level Monster. And the Raven Order that found the Monster first is forming a raid team centered around its Highest Tier Knight, Miss Kim Yu-Rin.

As its classification said, it was a boss-level Monster in the similar concept as one would find in games, right down to how heaven-defyingly impossible it was to defeat this creature with one or two Knights only. Such powerful Monsters would show up once every year in different countries all around the world.

"It's pretty close to our home, too... I hope they can subjugate it without much problem." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Yu Sae-Jung pretended to be a helpless young girl and sneakily leaned her head against his chest. Sae-Jin simply stared at the top of her head for a bit before uttering out what was on his mind.

[&]quot;By the way – aren't you supposed to go to work by now?"

[&]quot;....Haaah. Seriously?"

She gritted her teeth and glared at him. She was quite dumbstruck at the moment.

Sae-Jin still quietly studied her current appearance. It was as if she was trying to tell how peeved she was via her facial expressions – her brows were narrowed, her lips pouting.

That was why he suddenly snuck in with an unexpected kiss. She was so adorable at that moment, and he didn't really feel like trying to appease her annoyance as well.

As she was annoyed by him, she resisted at first, but well. She was beginning to lose to his already-proficient movements.

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"Mm... Mmm..."
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Her eyes closed; she followed with her senses his hands that had become a lot more familiar with her lately and were busy roaming all over her body.

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"Haaaa... ahh..."
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Sae-Jin slowly lowered her down on the couch. Since there was only an over-sized shirt to get rid of, taking her clothes off proved to be quick and easy.

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"Wait, I..."
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But before they could go any further, Yu Sae-Jung became shy from the early morning sunlight shining down brightly, and pushed him slightly away.

"...You don't have to hide such a wonderful body, you know?" (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin couldn't understand her reaction at all.

"No, I mean, it's just... If it's too bright, I feel a bit shy..."

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""
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Yu Sae-Jung's face reddened deeply and covered up her chest with both of her arms. Sae-Jin's brows narrowed but he still closed

the curtains quickly.

Only then, she jumped into his arms.

And so, the morning's activity resumed from there.

*

The following day.

"The Arteramus that appeared in Osaka was also classified as a Boss, but the one we're going to face is suspected to be a lot more powerful than that one."

Within the Raven Knights Order's Team 1 conference room, the briefing was being held to hash out the subjugation detail for the Boss Monster that had finally appeared after a long while.

"Looking rather grotesque from any distance, the Arteramus resembles a jet-black rooster from afar, but when studied closely, it has something like tentacles rather than fur on its body. And the bad news is, these tentacles contain a ton of concentrated Mana and each one of them are strong and sharp enough to easily pierce the defenses of a Knight." (Unknown Knight)

Tentacles grew from every part of its body, so the Arteramus possessed no blind spot in its direction of attack. That placed this bird into the category of the "really, unfairly cumbersome" Monster to face, yet its remains fetched enormous price thanks to all of its tentacles having small Mana Stones embedded inside.

Some even said that Japan's economic woes of the time were solved in one go with the capital earned from subjugating one Arteramus...

"So the composition of the team should be... At minimum, High Tiers and above?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

Yi Hye-Rin spoke with a somewhat tense face. If she participated in this raiding party, it was quite obvious that the monetary rewards would be more than sufficient. But the issue was with the inherent risk. No matter how much money she earned, she had to be alive first to enjoy it...

"Not too long ago, the Goblin Alchemist has decided to supply all the potions necessary for this raid in exchange for the small part of profits earned from the sale of the bird's remains. So you can rest your worries." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Let me! I'll do it!!"

As soon as words left Kim Yu-Rin's mouth, Yi Hye-Rin quickly raised her hand up high. There was a bright smile on her lips.

She felt like an idiot, right then, because it was rather obvious that the Goblin Alchemist would definitely help out here, since they were members in the same Guild to begin with. Even though Kim Yu-Rin was only a non-regular member, but still.

To have such a reliable and capable support, now this was what she was talking about. (TL: In this line, the author wrote an idiom "천군만마". The direct translation of it means, "thousand soldiers, ten thousand horses". I changed it at my behest.)

As Hye-Rin was being deeply impressed by The Monster Guild's personal connections, she was...

"You can't."

...She was being ruthlessly rejected.

"....Wah, why not?! I'm also a High Tier Knight, though?!" (Yi Hye-Rin)

"Your compatibility with that Monster is just too low. How will you defend against all those tentacles that shoot out tens of times in a single second with that sword of yours?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"I, I can definitely defend against them!! Instead..." (Yi Hye-Rin)

"Be quiet. We'll talk about that a bit later... For now, the next portion of this briefing will be done by me." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin coldly cut Yi Hye-Rin's words off and took over the

proceedings.

While carrying documents, she stood before the podium and let out a fake cough. It was unknown what she wanted to say just yet, but one could see how nervous she was.

"The total number participating in the raiding team will be... ten. That is the initial estimation. The plan is, of course, to pick Knights with Tiers at High, and within them, prioritise selecting the candidates with over 'B' rank in terms of the general capability, including the combat proficiency."

There weren't too many Knights in South Korea that met the strict conditions Yu-Rin had put forward.

This was because, High Tier Knights with general capabilities rated at B were good enough to really consider advancing to the Highest Tier rank.

"And so, the ones selected for this subjugation raid, are... Song Min-Yu, from Team 2, Joo Hah-Yeoung from Team 3..."

Kim Yu-Rin read out the names of eight people and then...

"...And Yi Hye-Rin." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Whew..."

Yi Hye-Rin was the 9th to enter the list.

However, Yu-Rin didn't name the last participant. Only just that, she was busy wetting her rapidly-drying lips, while they moved up and down slightly.

"...And who is the last one?"

Yi Hye-Rin wondered out aloud. Kim Yu-Rin then took a deep breath and then, spoke.

"For the last position, I'd like to invite the Hero Orc."

She spat out these words.

For a few seconds after those words left her mouth, no one spoke

up. At first, no one could quite understand what she was saying, and then, thought that she was cracking a high-level joke instead.

"...I believe that the Hero Orc's martial prowess approaches that of a Highest Tier Knight already. And its compatibility also fits, so if the Orc participates, it'll benefit us greatly. Not to forget, Orcs are creatures that enjoy battling strong foes. Definitely..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Nonono, wait a minute here! Are you, really, really serious about this?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

Unfortunately for the listeners, Kim Yu-Rin's attitude was quite serious, so Yi Hye-Rin had no choice but to step in.

"...I've taken over the management of the Hero Orcs of late. Enough people saw me enter that village. Also, the whole country knows that the Hero Orcs are not a threat and the current situation is, people wish to call them 'Korean Orcs' instead...."

"No, wait right there, but that's not the problem here?!"

Hye-Rin shook her head hard while showing how shocked she was.

"But it's completely nonsensical. You're telling us to raid a Monster with Orcs, which are also Monsters?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

"...What's wrong with that?"

Too bad, Kim Yu-Rin was completely, totally serious about this. Towards her, every Knight gathered here in the conference room sent in stares of utter shock.

"Also, the weapons wielded by the Orcs are special, so...."

However, Yu-Rin showed not one bit of concern and carried on with the briefing.

No, it was far more correct to call this a 'presentation' instead, to make these people accept the idea of the Hero Orc.

< 28. Changes in the Daily Life, part 2 (1) > Fin.

Chapter 95: Changes in the Daily Life, part 2 (2)

"...You, what?"

It was an afternoon.

Just like any other day, Sae-Jin in the Hero Orc Form welcomed Kim Yu-Rin, only to be met with quite an unexpected proposal.

"An aid?"

The changes in the Orc's facial expression was probably the most honest he had shown in ages. And that displayed how absurd her proposal was.

"...Yes. It is a very powerful Monster. If Mister Orc can fight with us, then there's a chance that the number of victims might decrease..."

Kim Yu-Rin was seriously trying to convince one Monster to help her slay another Monster.

The Orc carefully studied her appearance while feeling his mouth become numb. But he couldn't spot a single sign that she was joking at all.

"Also, you are the perfect natural enemy of this Monster bird. With that powerful shock wave you create..."

"You, want me to fight alongside humans?"

Even the 'human' Kim Sae-Jin found this notion ridiculous.

Of course, if he did choose to step up, then he'd become a powerful ally. But a cooperative hunting – a raid – needed a perfect teamwork as the lives of each and every participants were on the line. But she wanted a Monster to b**t in there? Not just the Knights but even the regular civilians would intervene and say no.

Was she under the delusion of thinking that he was a 'human'

since he could speak? Or was she still just too naïve? The Orc gazed down at her with slightly criticising eyes.

"I am well aware of Mister Orc's worries. However..."

"Forget it. You want to talk nonsense, then go away."

Even before Kim Yu-Rin could finish, the Orc coldly cut her off.

"Eh? Huh?"

Originally, Orcs loved to fight, plus the Hero Orc helped humans out before not to mention that he was on friendly terms with her. That was why she came here to speak to him but now, she was getting flustered by his cold refusal.

"I play with you a few times, and now you've gone mad. I said, go away, now."

She tried to say something in reply, but the Orc just shook his head to show there was nothing more left to say and vacated his seat. All she could do was to blankly stare at his back.

Seeing such a cold and decisive attitude, she almost thought that she saw a hologram containing the words 'favourable impression with the target has fallen' rising before her eyes, just like how someone with a particular Trait had described it to her.

*

The world's attention was naturally drawn towards the Boss level Monster that had appeared in South Korea in ages. The date the Raven Knights Order set for the subjugation was 25th of July, which meant there were still some time left until then. So, many TV stations busily moved around, getting ready for this massive, massive event.

First thing they did was to interview the ten participants of the raiding team – starting off with Yi Hye-Rin, then Song Min-Yu, Joo Hah-Yeoung, Kim Yu-Rin as well as other High Tier and Highest Tier Knights, and even....

"Yes. It's true that our Guild has decided to supply the potions." (Sae-Jin)

...Even including Kim Sae-Jin.

Although his expression clearly displayed his confusion at why he was being interviewed, as he and the PD conducting this interview had a good history that went back a long way, Sae-Jin didn't say much and agreed to do it.

"But we heard that it's more than just potions, however? Aren't you letting Miss Yi Hye-Rin borrow something quite special as well?" (Interviewer)

"Oh, that. Yes, as a fellow Guild member has requested for it, I'm lending a Griffin out to her." (Sae-Jin)

Three days ago, the Raven Knights Order asked to borrow a Griffin for the Boss raid. At first, Sae-Jin was curious as to why they needed one, but after receiving a call from Yi Hye-Rin, he understood their reason.

She loved being around and taking care of Griffins so much so that whenever she didn't have anything lined up in her schedule, she kept riding on Griffins until to the point of taking away the title of the "Griffin Rider" off Joo Ji-Hyuk. So, she and a Griffin together definitely presented a great tactical advantage in this raid.

As an aside, the Griffin in this case was not Muffin, but Muffin's male offspring.

Around six months ago, Muffin got married (?) to a Griffin that was a little bit – in other words, by a lot – younger than her and the number of cubs she produced was now sitting at 13 so far.

Well, the husband (?) in this case was drying up like a mummified husk thanks to Muffin's voracious sexual appetite, but whatever.

Kim Sae-Jin selected the male Griffin out of the 13 'kids' that was the closest to Yi Hye-Rin for this Boss raid. "That is so amazing. By the way, there seems to be a strange atmosphere brewing between the Raven and the Dawn currently. What are your thoughts regarding this development?" (Interviewer)

"...A strange atmosphere?" (Sae-Jin)

"Yes, sir. Isn't it true that you, the Guild Master, are quite close to the Dawn? Well, there are suspicions that you're switching your allegiances to the Raven, after showing a great deal of support in this group hunt, the so-called Boss raid."

The PD was mindful of the Guild's influence so he chose his words carefully.

In all honesty, the PD asking such questions was the sign of how powerful 'The Monster' had grown. Now normally, it would be the Societies that would be mindful of the Knights Orders and Wizard Towers, but with The Monster, it was the other way around – both the Orders and Towers were trying to make sure to get on the Guild's good side instead.

"Well, that... Wouldn't it be great if they combine their strength together? I quite like both Orders, you see." (Sae-Jin)

Since he was somewhat aware of this fact already, Sae-Jin decided to answer as vaguely as possible.

"In that case..."

"Should we end the interview here? I have prior engagements, you see."

Sae-Jin cut the next question from the PD right there.

Today was the 14th of July, the date of a very important promise he needed to keep.

"Oh, yes. Thank you for agreeing to do this interview."

Although there were still countless questions they wanted to ask, the filming crew and the PD quickly got ready to leave and requested for a hand shake from Sae-Jin. Their attitudes had changed quite a bit compared to before, which only made Sae-Jin feel more satisfied as he began shaking hands.

*

And now, it was the day of the fierce battle – the Boss raid; a one-time event that had gripped the world's attention, enough to even surpass over 30% in the overall viewing figure.

The ten Knights and four Wizards hired for this raid entered a limo while receiving words of encouragements and well wishes from the waiting crowd, and hurriedly made their way towards the Boss Monster's nesting ground.

After arriving at the entrance to the city of Youngju, they exited the vehicle and made the rest of the way on foot, carefully threading through the devastated cityscape.

"There it is!!"

Yi Hye-Rin shouted out aloud.

Only after slaughtering masses of Monsters and walking for a long while, they could finally locate the sight of the black rooster at a far off distance.

"...Hey, isn't that much bigger than we thought?" (Unnamed Knight)

However, they felt something was wrong as they stared at it. The Monster seemed far bigger, compared to when they were discussing about it in the mission briefing...

"Looks like it has grown. And also, Hye-Rin, do remember that you're in a battlefield." (Song Min-Yu)

"...But I'm doing the best that I can?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

"Yes, the best that you can play with a Griffin." (Song Min-Yu)

"Stop it, both of you. First of all, Wizards. Both of the Boss Monster's maximum attack range and aggro distance is suspected to be quite considerable." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin quickly subdued the two bickering high-ranked Knights, Song Min-Yu and Yi Hye-Rin, and started the new mission briefing.

"So please, get to as far a safe distance as possible, hide yourselves well and then use your magic spells." (Kim Yu-Rin)

The Wizards nodded their heads.

"And to the Knights present, we will fight exactly according to how we practiced for this battle."

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"""Yes, ma'am."""
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All the Knights replied back with gusto, with the exception of one Yi Hye-Rin who was still too absorbed in brushing the fur of her Griffin.

"Yi Hye-Rin?"

"Ah, yes! Yes?!"

"...Can you do this? Your target is its eyes."

The reason for escorting (?) a Griffin while sacrificing a part of the reward payment was to attack the Monster bird's weak point. Since the creature was as tall as two Ogres stacked together, it would be incredibly difficult to hit the weak points located on the creature's head with their sword auras or magic attacks, after all.

"But of course~. Leave it to me."

Yi Hye-Rin vigorously replied, and as if to agree with her, the Griffin next to her powerfully flapped its wings once.

"...Well, then. Everyone, please drink your potions now."

Kim Yu-Rin pulled out the potion 'A Goblin's Courage' while telling the others to do the same.

This scarlet-coloured liquid was rated first among the body fortification potions on sale. It was also seen as the next best item made by the Goblin Alchemist after his famed healing potions. It was in such a demand that it was difficult to buy one as it was so rarely circulated on the market.

"Don't hesitate because it's rare, just drink it all. Well, any remaining potions will be confiscated." (Kim Yu-Rin)

At her declaration, one or two ended up drinking the whole vial of the potions all the while still feeling great regret at the same time. The obvious exception was, of course, Yi Hye-Rin, who was sharing her potion with the Griffin.

"Let's go."

The effects of the potion was as advertised. All the Knights who had drunk the potion could feel their vitality increasing exponentially.

"Okay!!"

"Let's move!"

"I'm going up ahead!" (Yi Hye-Rin)

- Kkiiieeeck!!

As they had practiced before, the Griffin took Yi Hye-Rin on its back and flew into the sky while roaring out loudly. And when the Monster bird's focus was drawn towards this sudden intrusion, the Knights on the ground quickly made their way towards their target.

Sensing something was amiss, the Monster bird extended out its tentacles from its body, but the combination of Yi Hye-Rin and the Griffin easily avoided those while she wielded her sharp sword.

There was no real need to get too close, since there was the attribute 'Bending' imbued within her sword, which allowed her to freely manipulate the attacking distance at will.

SFX for a blade slashing through air

The sword light from Yi Hye-Rin's attack drew a blue-coloured

trajectory as it snaked its way towards the Monster's eyes. And soon afterwards, the pained roar reverberated throughout the land.

"Yeehaw~!!"

30 seconds after the battle had begun. After achieving her goal, Yi Hye-Rin let out a loud shout. And the Knights rushed forward towards the Monster bird while the assured smile of victory formed on their faces.

*

Someone once said that one should wait until the end before celebrating.

Although the raid team successfully robbed the Monster of its eyesight less than one minute into the battle, the situation afterwards then steadily became worse and worse for them.

The issue was the Monster's massive size. They already knew that the number of tentacles would be high because of its huge body, but still, they weren't prepared just how ridiculously high it would be in reality.

No, this wasn't simply the problem of the high number of tentacles. The information clearly stated that the Japanese Boss raid only required three Highest Tier Knights back then. However, this team contained four Highest Tiers, six High Tier Knights, as well as four Wizards ranked B, yet...

"Kkeuhk!!"

Unfortunately, in this kind of situation, holding doubts of the Monster's true strength was a luxury none of the Knights could afford.

The tentacles rushed in like a hailstorm, not even giving them time to take a breather. It was a mistake to believe that its eyes were the weak point, as the Monster bird accurately intercepted the Knights even after losing its eyesight. 'How can this be...?' (Kim Yu-Rin)

The total number of tentacles sliced off already exceeded ten thousand. However, no matter how many they cut, the number didn't seem to decrease at all.

There was no opening in the tentacles pouring down like raindrops from the sky, and conversely, there was no chance for a counterattack as well. On top of this, these d**n things steadily ate away their Mana barriers surrounding the Knights' bodies, which even made a rash charge forward an impossibility, too.

'No one said these things can eat away our Mana barriers!!'

Kim Yu-Rin gritted her teeth as she cut down yet more tentacles.

She had initially underestimated this Monster – since the tentacles were the part of the creature, with the activation of her Trait, she believed it would not take very long to bring this d**n bird down at all.

But thinking like that was clearly a mistake.

Those tentacles were not the part of the Monster bird but a separate entity altogether. The proof was the fact that the huge Monster still remained standing even after she imbued the purpose of "faint even for a little bit of time" in her sword before attacking it.

It was most likely that these tentacles were either parasites or symbiotes that lived off the main body.

"...D**n it!!"

Her roughly-swung sword strike drew a crescent shaped arc and sliced through countless tentacles, yet more replaced them.

"Everyone, retreat!!"

Kim Yu-Rin shouted out. Her voice managed to travel to the others through the gaps of the attacking tentacles, but too bad, none of them possessed any leeway to make their getaway. It

simply took their all just to defend themselves from all these tentacles, after all.

And so, it proved that even Yu-Rin herself couldn't make any follow-up orders in the end as well.

SFX for the crow of a rooster

That was because her consciousness shook into disarray for a short moment as soon as the loud crow shattered the surroundings.

"...Kkheuck!"

Seizing this opening, a tentacle bit into her body. But Yu-Rin simply wrapped the bleeding shoulder with Mana and continued to wield her sword.

She hadn't given up, but still, the situation was easy to figure out.

The flow of the battle was disadvantageous, and they couldn't even safely retreat anymore – the worst of all worst situations.

As the despair crept into the minds of all the Knights present here and their defeat becoming ever so a certainty...

From somewhere, a loud and powerful roar assaulted them. A familiar roar, it sure sounded like the call of salvation to Kim Yu-Rin's ears.

Kkwaaahang!!

Along with the roar, a massive shock wave traveled from the direction of North East and smashed apart all the tentacles while continuously expanding towards the Monster bird's main body.

- Kkieeck!!

It struck the creature. The Monster bird issued a short cry and retracted all of its tentacles, and that in turn gave all the Knights

here valuable time.

"...Haah."

The Knights quickly turned to look towards the direction of the mountainside where the shock wave had come from, while trying to rein in their rough breaths. At that moment, no one had a clue what to say.

Not one, not two, but dozens and dozens of Orcs were busy rushing over here while raising a cloud of dust.

"Ah..."

And Yu-Rin inadvertently let out a gasp after seeing the sight of the Hero Orc among the rushing Orcs, overflowing with a remarkably heroic aura.

It was such a cool appearance.

< 28. Changes in the Daily Life, part 2 (2) > Fin.

Chapter 96: Changes in the Daily Life, part 2 (3)

The flow of the battle reversed in a heartbeat as soon as the band of Orcs jumped into the fray.

Kwaaahang!!

The shock wave spreading out in the air easily blew away thousands of tentacles blanketing the sky like a dissipating fog.

And that lull in the constant attacks of tentacles naturally gave the Knights much needed breathing room; now that their own pace had been regained, they were in the position to go on the offensive.

SFX for tentacles rushing forward

However, the number of tentacles shooting out from the Monster bird seemed to know no end.

Still, the assault from these elite Orcs were no laughing matter, either.

Whenever they swung their destructive maces, tens of hundreds of tentacles turned to dust. These Orcs didn't rely or care for style or technique, just focusing on brutal strength only.

—-!!

The Orc that was the most heroic and magnificent roared out aloud and kicked the ground hard, jumping into the air.

His leg strength allowed him to jump up several tens of metres with absolute ease, and he went straight towards the Monster's cockscomb...

SFX for tentacles shooting something out

Instinctively sensing the approaching danger, the tentacles mounted on the Monster bird's body began spewing poison towards the Orc while making a strange noise. But the Orc didn't give a d**n and simply activated the Leviathan's scales to the absolute maximum.

Although the Monster fired off the poison confidently, it had no effect on the scales, other than washing off the dirt and making them look more shiny than before.

'It's not enough.'

But, unless Sae-Jin was in the Lycanthrope Form, it seemed that this was the limit of what the Orc's leg strength could do; he was actually aiming for the creature's weakness, its comb, but he could only reach the edges of its wattle on the neck.

Since there was little he could now, he used the Skill 'Fierce Strike' on the wattle, instead.

Tthaaahang!!

The clear and vivid roar resounded at the same time as the attack connected. The Monster bird writhed in pain after its vocal cord was attacked, but it couldn't cry out that destructive crow anymore. Now the things had come to this, the plan B was proving to be better than he initially thought.

SFX for tentacles attacking

However, the tentacles were not suffering from the same pain as the Monster bird itself, as they were separate entities to begin with. Since its host's life was in danger, all the tentacles seemed to lose any reasoning whatsoever and focused solely on one target, rushing towards the Orc that had attacked the Monster bird.

And well, that was the biggest mistake this Monster could ever make in its life.

"Everyone!!"

Pressed for time, Kim Yu-Rin shouted out one word as she dashed towards the Monster bird. Other Knights shared the same thought

as her and every one of the 10 Knights present jumped towards the Monster.

But in all honesty, there was no need for all ten of them. It was enough with Kim Yu-Rin there. She squeezed out every ounce of Mana from her body and activated the Trait 'Desideratum', imbuing the sword with the strongest purpose she could load the weapon with – "faint, never to wake up".

" "

The moment Yu-Rin's sword struck the Monster, its body began to falter to the side slowly.

"Heu-euck..."

Even Yu-Rin herself faltered and squatted down as well. As she didn't have enough Mana, her Trait would remain activated for ten seconds at most, but that ten was more than enough.

After all, it didn't matter if those tentacles still thrashed about, as the Monster bird lying on its side unmoving was no better than a chicken waiting to be slaughtered in the end.

On top of this massive fallen chicken, the group of Orcs and Knights descended.

And so, that was how Kim Sae-Jin was able to read yet another feel-good alert window.

The actual reason why he brought along these elite Orcs to this place was quite simple. He thought that, judging from the clues he had seen until now, he might evolve into the Orc Chieftain if he led other Orcs in a group hunt.

And his expectation was right on the money.

[Condition complete: the group hunt. (3/3)]

[The Monster Form 'Orc Great Warrior' will evolve into 'Orc Chieftain'.]

[All Stats will rise drastically, and the body hair will grow

accordingly.]

'...Hair?!'

What hair? Does my hair represent the Skill Level or something?

Initially, he felt somewhat disappointed by this. But well, when he checked his Status Window, his jaw hit the floor. With the exception of Mana Affinity and Magic Strength, every other Stat saw an explosive increase of over 100 points each.

Plus, the amount of time he could suppress the instincts of the Lycanthrope, the time he could spend as the human Kim Sae-Jin, had increased to over 18.5 hours... So, yes, in that moment, he couldn't be more happier even if he tried.

*

The end of the battle finally came with the Orc Chieftain ripping off the Monster bird's cockscomb; the only thing that filled this vast open space was deathly quiet stillness. Ten Knights tried to control their heavy breathing, all the while staring at the group of Orcs.

66 2

As expected, the first one to move among them was Kim Yu-Rin. She carefully moved her feet towards the Orc Chieftain.

As the desolate wind blew across the land and tickled past the ankles, Yu-Rin carefully gathered both her arms in front of her chest while looking up at the Orc. That faint smile on her lips seemed to represent her current state of emotions.

"...You did come. But you said you wouldn't."

She shyly opened her mouth. The Orc slightly turned his head to look down on her.

The thing was, her face was caked with sweat as well as with dried and unidentifiable black blood – which pretty much made her look not so good at the moment. On top of this, his sensitive

nose was picking up some atrocious odour drifting out of her that reminded him of clogged up sewers.

"...Ah, I'm..."

However, while totally unaware of her current appearance, she became more and more abashed at the Orc's pointed stares, and began twisting her body this way and that.

""

The Orc let out a hollow chuckle and turned around to leave. Since he became the Chieftain, he got what he came here for. No need to endure the smell of sewers if he could help it.

"Wait, Mister Orc!!"

Kim Yu-Rin was about to chase after the back of the cold and indifferent Orc, but then, someone appeared out of nowhere and grasped her arm, stopping her.

It was Yi Hye-Rin this time as well. Yu-Rin's face hardened as she yanked her arm loose.

But Yi Hye-Rin played this smartly, and instead of saying anything, she simply showed the reflection of Yu-Rin's face on the polished surface of the sword. And the face that stared back was... really something else.

"...Ah."

Yu-Rin's jaws went slack after receiving a powerful mental shock, seeing that pathetic appearance. Even her consciousness wanted to blank out as well.

*

The information embargo on the Boss raid was lifted the moment the Monster was defeated and all the participants returned relatively unhurt. The news media that watched the battle from a great distance all hurriedly began doing their thing.

Disregarding all else, the news of the Hero Orcs entering the raid

spread around and began snowballing into something bigger. The public didn't pay much attention towards the unexpectedly-high strength of the Monster bird, and rather, the event of the Orcs helping out in the raid stole all the headlines away instead.

Among the razor-sharp focused attention, Kim Yu-Rin's opinion that the Knights could perform the raid together with the Orcs got reevaluated favourably, but during the post-raid press conference, the person herself seemed rather downtrodden for some reason.

[I was tasked with watching over the village of the Hero Orc, and during my time there, I became friendly with the Hero Orc Chieftain. When we were planning out this raid, I immediately thought of conducting it with the Hero Orc, but he ended up refusing the request. However... on the day of the raid, he came to lend us an aid...]

Thanks to Yu-Rin's press conference, the Orc was able to get an unexpected and explosive reaction from the female half of the populace. They were saying something about him being the "bad boy" type that women fell for.

On the other side of the spectrum, many academics became incredibly excited, saying that this event would go down in the annals of the world's history as the beginning of a new era and many of them even began writing dissertations on it as well.

However, the man responsible for causing all this havoc, Kim Sae-Jin, had to go to a rather weird place on the first day of August.

"How many?" (Unnamed Knight 1)

There was a tower in the Gangwon Province that rose up very high into the sky. A tower that was absolutely overwhelming in its presence among the forest of skyscrapers, and at the same time, utterly different from them in concept.

This tower was often referred to as the holy land of all the

Knights out there, and had the name Eden attached to it.

"The number that passed the final preliminary elimination is 205. It's quite a lot." (Unnamed Knight 2)

"It's no longer the level of 'quite', though?" (Unnamed Knight 1)

Eden annually ran an evaluation test to officially appoint Knights and assign ranks to them. And today was the day when the Lowest Tier Knights – the ones that would be assigned to the Orders all over the country – would be selected.

Normally, the participants of this test were cadets from the Knight Academy as well as those who had awakened their Traits.

Cadets without Traits were still allowed to participate if they presented their grades from the Academy. As for those who awakened their Trait recently, one only had to prove that he or she possessed a 'useful' Trait to enter.

"The ratio is?" (Unnamed Knight 1)

"Almost all of them – no, with the exception of one, everyone else is either a cadet taking the test for the first time, or one who is repeating it. Ten of the newbie cadets possess Traits, sir." (Unnamed Knight 2)

"Anyone interesting we should look out for?" (Unnamed Knight 1)

"Yes. There are three." (Unnamed Knight 2)

The subordinate Knight handed over a chart to his superior officer.

"First one is Yi Yu-Jin. A female, scored very highly in the proficiency of wielding Mana. Judging by how well she can control her sword aura already, I assume she might be referred to as the new Kim Yu-Rin or even Yu Sae-Jung in the near future." (Unnamed Knight 2)

"...Is it a trend nowadays that talented female Knights must look

like a supermodel?" (Unnamed Knight 1)

"Haha... Well, there's nothing we can do about that, sir. When a woman wields Mana, that process alone always smoothes out the skin tone and subtly reshapes facial structure to the so-called ideal form, after all."

A thin, bitter smile spread on the superior officer's lips. He was feeling rather disappointed at this idiot subordinate of his for still believing in that superstitious nonsense...

"Next?" (Unnamed Knight 1)

"His name is Kim Myung-Hahn, sir. A male, possessing a unique Trait. It's been named 'Asura', and it lets him control surrounding Mana as his own." (Unnamed Knight 2)

"Hooh."

"And finally... He's the only one who is not a cadet, sir. And he's a homeless as well. Apparently, his Trait awakened a while ago when he was about to die from the cold and so he applied for a spot today." (TL: I almost TLed the homeless as a NEET instead. Just so you know.)

The superior officer frowned deeply. Such an occurrence happened every now and then, but whenever he heard of it, it pissed him off, somewhat. To think, these no good wastrels were trying to become Knights relying only on their Traits and not through hard work...

"And what's his name?"

"It's Jin Seh-Hahn."

"...Remember it well, and if he acts like he's about to do something funny, kick him out."

Jin Seh-Hahn.

Actually, that was the fake identity Kim Sae-Jin was using.

It was easy to forge a fake identity with the help of the

intelligence operatives he had fostered until now, but Sae-Jin's was even more water-tight thanks to Yu Baek-Song's intervention as well.

The biggest issue with his outer appearance was also taken care of, with something called 'Partial Beastification'.

Obviously, there was nothing he could do about his overall facial structure, but his eyelines, the nose and the jawline were all changed slightly to resemble a wolf more closely; and by extending his beard and goatee to a ridiculous degree, he certainly looked like a totally different person altogether.

As for his powerful scent – well, he acquired an artifact that emitted a very unpleasant odour in order to suppress his own.

And the reason why he had to infiltrate Eden's Knight evaluation test while going so far as to change his appearance, was...

One had to look back to a date four weeks ago: 14th of July.

On a perfectly average Summer afternoon, when Kim Sae-Jin held a meeting with Yu Baek-Song within the Guild's office.

*

Now that she had relinquished the position of the Chief of the SID, Yu Baek-Song's face seemed somewhat conflicted, one part sad, one part glad.

"And when is the date for the inauguration ceremony for the vacant ministerial position?" (Sae-Jin)

"How should I know? It'll be announced when it's ready, I guess." (Yu Baek-Song)

Kim Hahn-Seol was being prosecuted for taking bribes as well as for collusion among many others. Even then, he was still trying to contact Sae-Jin, desperately searching for a way out, but Sae-Jin remained ruthless.

"If you climb up to that position, you can finally find the

information we talked about, yes?" (Sae-Jin)

"...Well, the thing is... I already had it checked out." (Yu Baek-Song)

At Yu Baek-Song's words, Sae-Jin's eyes went extra round.

"But, that..."

"However, it's not what you've been expecting, not at all. That information is impossible even for me to access." (Yu Baek-Song)

"...What do you mean?"

His momentary expectation morphed into cold disappointment real fast.

"The reason is, I still lack the qualifications. And so, all I could find out was just where the info might be buried in." (Yu Baek-Song)

Yu Baek-Song then sighed out deeply.

"...And where could it be?" (Sae-Jin)

"The 2nd Tier Secret Records Archives, located in the upper mid floors of the tower of Eden. It seems that your father was a Knight directly working for Eden."

" "

"I'm sure you know of this already; Eden is a world-wide organization and is therefore the same as any other independent nation. Obviously, it's different from country to county, but no matter what, unless you're a member of the Eden's administration, it's impossible to extract any information out from there."

Kim Sae-Jin held his head with a pained expression. As the things he had done until now became a waste of time, the amount of disappointment and emptiness he felt couldn't even be imagined.

What came next after disappointment was anger. Besides the fact that his father was seemingly a Knight who worked for Eden, just what kind of truth precipitated a need to treat the information about him as a top secret and hide it away in a location on the tower's upper mid floors?

"...So, in order to extract the relevant information, we need someone to become the Knight of Eden."

"Theoretically, yep. But just who can become a Knight working for Eden at this stage? I mean, it's hard enough trying to become a Knight working for regular Orders, for crying out loud." (Yu Baek-Song)

If one wanted to become a Knight of Eden, then he or she had to forget about one's aspirations and enter the organization voluntarily.

Meaning, after passing the test, one had to give up the chance of going to other Knights Orders and must choose to enter Eden instead.

On top of this, considering the fact that the entrance was open to not just the local candidates but to the rest of the world, the entry barrier was actually a lot tougher than simply being a Lowest Tier Knight. Not to forget, one only got a single chance in life to voluntarily enter Eden, too.

And so, the number of successful applicants that entered Eden in the past three years from South Korea was.... just one.

That showed just how much Eden valued the future growth potential and abilities of its candidates...

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" ??
" ??
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In that moment, Kim Sae-Jin stared at Yu Baek-Song. She too stared right back at him.

Silently, a strange but knowing gaze was exchanged between the two of them.

However, Kim Sae-Jin already had a past record of being a Hunter, and also he was just too famous, so it was not possible for him to become a Knight affiliated with Eden, the group that emphasized on its members' 'dedication' above all else.

"...You said you can make any artifacts, right?"

Yu Baek-Song spoke first. Although rare, artifacts that could alter a person's appearance still existed.

"Yes, I did."

Even though he said as much, the truth was, Sae-Jin didn't really need an artifact.

"I heard that Knights of Eden can freely commute as they please?" (Sae-Jin)

"Yeah, that's right. Those people in Eden receive commission from other Knights Orders and the national government, you see. So they do have a lot of free time."

Kim Sae-Jin began smiling in an evil manner.

Wasn't this just a perfect condition for him?

"But can you fight, like, really well?"

"It's one of my Traits, so yes."

Of course, he hadn't yet faced off against a Knight who used Mana at full power during sparring, but even when simply comparing on his physique as a 'human', he was on par with a talented Mid Tier Knight.

"It'll take some time, so will you be okay with that?" (Yu Baek-Song)

"...Why would it take time? Knights only value abilities, after all."

As long as he was careful about the potential camp training, he'd be fine.

And that's how Kim Sae-Jin was able to participate in Eden's Knights evaluation test as Jin Seh-Hahn.

"Welcome, everyone."

Whenever there was an evaluation, Eden would often invite famous Knights to serve as temporary instructors. And the person invited this time was someone rather familiar even to Sae-Jin.

It was Joo Ji-Hyuk.

He was putting on as much airs as possible and tried to appear commanding to the crowd.

"You'll be participating in various tests once every day for the duration of one week. You can choose to stay in the dormitory located in Eden Tower's 1st floor, or alternatively, choose to commute from home..."

'....Haaahhh'

While hearing this, Sae-Jin inwardly sighed out. He wasn't even shooting an episode of 'Undercover Boss' or something like that, and yet, here he was....

"For now, you will take a seat and be on standby. Carry on."

As Sae-Jin was going through the emotions of shame, he missed the end of Joo Ji-Hyuk's announcements and ended up falling into a bit of panic.

"...What the hell."

The applicants who were already familiar with one another began to form groups of same classes, those who were repeating the test, or those who came from the same neighbourhood, etc, etc...

There was seemingly no opening whatsoever to penetrate such tight cliques, and soon, all 204 applicants began sending chilly gazes of contempt towards Sae-Jin's direction, after the rumours

of him passing the initial evaluation without a hassle thanks to his great Trait had permeated to everywhere already.

And so, he had become a sore thumb sticking out in less than three seconds.

"...Is he the one?"

"Dunno what Trait he has, but it must've been pretty nice, huh?"

"I heard it from my mom that he's a bum. A homeless bum!! Look at his beard – it's so mangy and stuff!!"

While eavesdropping on the conversations going on around him via his sensitive hearing, Sae-Jin couldn't help but sigh out inwardly again. Didn't matter whether they were Knights or not, the fact remained that they were still a bunch of kids.

"But, hmm. Don't you think he might look good if he got rid of that beard?"

"...So what. The fact is, he is still someone who didn't put in any effort unlike us, just leeching off on that lottery win of his."

He then caught onto someone praising him like a ghost, and his head snapped towards the direction almost like a reflex.

He saw a pair of boy and girl. He might as well call them a handsome couple or some such. There were only two of them and not one more, and there was no one else around them, either.

"...Huh? Isn't he looking over here? Do you think he might come over?"

The boy spoke with an interested voice.

"If he comes, then tell him to scram."

But the girl's was rather sardonic, instead.

'I'm not going there even if you beg me.'

After slyly appraising them over, Sae-Jin shook his head and plopped down on where he stood, before he began stroking the

lengthy beard that grew along his jawline. There was something quite addictive about it as he played around with it.

< 28. Changes in the Daily Life, part 2 (3) > Fin.

Chapter 97: Eden, The Tower of Knights (1)

Although there were countless cadets who chose to take the evaluation exam immediately after graduating from the Academy, the number of them passing it the first time and then becoming a Knight were quite low.

That was because most of these new graduates simply lacked in ability compared to the so-called repeat test takers, who were sometimes referred to as 'Nth takers', and were eliminated during the preliminaries.

So, after graduating from their respective schools and the Academy, quite a few cadets received further private education or trained alone by themselves while continuously applying for the exam for the period between one to four years. Beyond that point, it was tacitly understood the applicant was unable to pass and had to give up there.

And those who were able to attain some form of enlightenment – or even "awaken" a Trait, although possibility of this was extremely low – would pass the exam with a good grade and enter famous a Knights Order such as the Dawn, Raven or Goryeo, etc, etc. But if not, then they would have to give up on being a Knight, or be satisfied with a life as a Low Tier ~ low Mid Tier Knight in a small Order based in some rural backwater towns.

With this backstory in mind, the groups present here at the examination grounds were separated accordingly to the age of the participants.

As the policy dictated, one-third of the test takers were fresh cadets straight out of the Academy's graduation ceremony, but the rest were the repeat test takers who could understand one another's hardship and loneliness.

But for Kim Sae-Jin, who was an existence that didn't fit into either category, all he could do was to sit alone and eavesdrop on

other people's conversations.

Initially, cadets busily berated and mocked Jin Seh-Hahn/Kim Sae-Jin as a person who didn't even go to the Academy but relied solely on his Trait to pass the preliminary, but soon enough, stopped caring about him and became lost within their own conversations.

"Everyone, atten-hut!!"

As Seh-Hahn (Sae-Jin) was about to get bored of listening in on these kids, Joo Ji-Hyuk appeared with a good timing and announced the beginning of the examination proper. All the participants got up and paid him close attention.

"Follow in the groups of 50 as assigned before. We will be heading to the 3rd floor for your first test."

Speaking up to here, Joo Ji-Hyuk led the groups forward, while three instructors who had seemingly appeared out of nowhere began silently following them.

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The first day's evaluation was 'measurement'.

The purpose of this was to measure the current abilities of those who had passed the preliminary and to establish a ranking of the participants, which would prove important moving forward. It would serve as a basis to decide which cadet should go through and who would be disqualified.

Although having a high talent didn't mean one would be great at the actual combat situations, still, all the cadets' attitude towards this measurement was very serious, as it was definitely better to start off somewhere near the 'top' rather than at the 'bottom'.

"Today will be different from the preliminaries when your physical capabilities, talents with Mana, etc, etc, were measured. Today, your actual combat ability will be put to the test." (Joo Ji-Hyuk)

Hearing Joo Ji-Hyuk speak, Sae-Jin fell into a slight dilemma. Since he was in the 'Human' form, he was much weaker compared to the 'Lycanthrope' appearance, but still, his raw physical strength would easily match a upper Mid Tier Knight.

It was this massive power level that was the cause for his dilemma.

Even though he was trying to become a Knight of Eden... What Eden looked for from a cadet wasn't the current set of abilities, but the potential for growth and talent. However, wasn't being a upper Mid Tier from the get-go a bit too much? Sure, their evaluation criteria for the ability of an applicant was higher than most other Knights Orders, but still.

"And that is the Monster you'll be facing off today." (Joo Ji-Hyuk)

While he was thinking, the exam got under way. A Wizard on the 3rd floor balcony, tasked with lending an assistance to the exam procedure, summoned a Monster.

SFX for a dog's bark

A Monster that sat on the boundary of between a "normal" difficulty and "slightly hard" within the Low Tier, a Heavy Gnoll was summoned to the testing arena.

Cadets all tensed up, but for Sae-Jin, all enthusiasm left him, instead.

A hollow chuckle even broke out of his lips, after he realised once more the fact that he was in the middle of a children's playground.

"Who'd like to go first?"

Joo Ji-Hyuk scanned the cadets, smiling. And there was this one girl who energetically reacted to his calling.

"Lemme do it!!"

Hair vividly dyed in vibrant orange brown; razor-sharp eyelines

and a nose that could slice a person. A hardened expression as if unsatisfied by something – but she's was a girl whose beauty could make those features as a charming "plus", instead.

"Name?" (Joo Ji-Hyuk)

"It's Cadet Yi Yu-Jin."

"Oh-ho." (Joo Ji-Hyuk)

Sae-Jin could see that this girl must have been quite a famous future prospect, judging by the way Joo Ji-Hyuk was reacting towards her.

"Alright. Then go ahead." (Joo Ji-Hyuk)

While her long hair danced with each step taken, Yi Yu-Jin enthusiastically walked towards the prepared stage.

"No need to wait for the signal. Just start whenever you're ready." (Joo Ji-Hyuk)

She stood before the growling Gnoll and carefully surveyed her surroundings and the Monster itself.

And after maybe three minutes had passed, she finally unsheathed her sword. Funnily enough, though, her well-crafted weapon was an item Sae-Jin was rather intimately familiar with.

"...Isn't that one of the training swords I made?"

The sword Sae-Jin made in order to use during training; out of ten Knights he had asked to come and spar with him, eight showed much interest in the weapon, so he told them to take it home... There was this rumour he heard that the swords were being sold in the second hand markets. Must've been a true story.

"Heup!!"

Right away, Yi Yu-Jin let out a short shout and rushed towards the Gnoll.

"Ho?" (Sae-Jin)

Her swordsmanship was extraordinary enough to even make Sae-Jin let out a light gasp of exclamation.

Her sword seemed to aim at the Gnoll's neck but then, took a sudden turn and swung towards the Monster's chest. Her style of wielding the sword, where she would sometimes switch the grip on the weapon and aim for the Gnoll's ankle, was completely unconventional, to say the least.

Indeed, it was as far from prescribed on the textbooks as one could imagine, but perhaps because of that, her swordsmanship style was lot more valuable than normal.

SFX for a strange death howl

A small sweat drop flowed down to Yi Yu-Jin's chin and fell, and at the same time, Gnoll, with a hole in its chest, ceased breathing after letting out a weird cry.

"Good, very good."

Joo Ji-Hyuk clapped his hands and spoke in admiration after getting charmed by her skills.

"That was commendable. Alright, then. From now on, no more volunteers and the person with the name I call out will go up to the arena." (Joo Ji-Hyuk)

His admiration lasted only for a short while. Joo Ji-Hyuk resumed his duty as a proctor and began calling out different names.

And after around twenty people had their combat abilities measured...

"Next, Jin Seh-Hahn!"

Finally, Jin Seh-Hahn/Kim Sae-Jin's turn had arrived. Maybe it was due to his already eye-catching outer appearance, all the gazes present focused on him the moment the name left Joo Ji-Hyuk's mouth.

While tensing up slightly at the possibility of Joo Ji-Hyuk getting suspicious of him, Jin Seh-Hahn/Kim Sae-Jin walked up to the arena.

SFX for a dog's growl

Right away, the Heavy Gnoll showed a particular reaction. All because his nice scent having been blended with that unpleasant odour.

SFX for a dog's louder growl

The Monster stomped on the ground with both of its feet and showed signs of rushing forward. Meanwhile, Sae-Jin was leisurely deliberating on what to do next. How should he win this – act like he was fighting a desperate battle and then pull out the hidden trump card? Or, like Yi Yu-Jin before him, overwhelm the creature from the get-go?

SFX for a crazed, mad barking of a dog

Well, he couldn't stay undecided for a long time anyway. The frenzied Gnoll had already rushed forward and was about to arrive in front of him.

*

With a pair of deeply interested eyes, Yi Yu-Jin gazed at the homeless bum that had walked up to the arena, Jin Seh-Hahn.

'He's got a good physique.'

Although the lengthy beard connected to his sideburns looked rather unfashionable, the muscles that could be spied from the gaps of his training suit looked better than excellent. Yi Yu-Jin didn't want to admit this, but in all honesty, even Knights would struggle to obtain such a body.

A body that wasn't heavy enough to restrict one's movement, but also not light enough either – the perfectly balanced, so-called 'Iron Body'.

'Is his Trait related to his physique?'

Unless it was a Trait, it'd be quite difficult to explain how a homeless bum could possess such a body – plus, seeing that he was empty-handed as well, it just had to be a Trait at work here. That's how Yi Yu-Jin had figured, but still, as a woman herself, she found it hard to tear her eyes away from that broad and sturdy back of Jin Seh-Hahn.

"Oi, what's the matter with that Gnoll?" (Goh Yun-Jong)

As she was looking at the unfolding situation with interest while not caring much about the character of the person in question, her childhood friend Goh Yun-Jong suddenly began raising a fuss. That made Yi Yu-Jin to divert her attention as well.

And she saw the Gnoll angrily growling and threatening, its eyes bloodshot – which was quite unlike before, as if it also intensely disliked that homeless bum or something.

"This is getting interesting, right? I wonder how he will react?" (Goh Yun-Jong)

At Goh Yun-Jong's words, Yi Yu-Jin shifted her focus back to Jin Seh-Hahn.

"He's panicking." (Yi Yu-Jin)

She could tell just by seeing the back of him hesitate ever so slightly.

"Look, you can see quite easily. He has no idea how to respond when the Monster is rushing at him. And you know why? Because Traits don't teach you stuff like that." (Yi Yu-Jin)

She clicked her tongue and commented on what was happening up on the arena.

"I've said this before. Relying on only your Traits will end up ruining you. That is why..." (Yi Yu-Jin)

"*SFX for a loud martial art shout*"

Tuokwahang!!!

Almost at the same time, with a loud shout, a powerful explosion resounded in the arena.

And afterwards, a scene beyond the scope of her ability to understand unfolded right before her eyes.

Kwagagagang!!

It was nothing more than a single punch, yet the Gnoll's body flew away like an emptiest of all empty cans in the history of mankind. (TL: Hahaha, One Punch Man reference, right here.)

SFX for steam rising up

Before long, the Gnoll was embedded deeply on the wall opposite side, leaving behind only its outline, and from the path it flew, hot steam slowly rose up.

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A single punch, one fist, caused this absolutely overwhelming scene. The only thing filling up the space was a deafening silence.

"...Keum. That's a Trait, alright. Looks like a nice Trait, too." (Yi Yu-Jin)

Even Yi Yu-Jin was dumbstruck by what happened, but recovered her wits quickly after sensing Goh Yun-Jong's gaze on her. She nodded her head as if it was all within her expectations.

"I thought you were lecturing us on about panic and whatnot just now?" (Goh Yun-Jong)

"...What are you on about? It's true that he was panicking. It's just that, his Trait is powerful enough to overcome it, that's all." (Yi Yu-Jin)

Too bad for her, a drop of cold sweat traveling down her forehead was incomparably more honest than her words.

And now, after the end of the combat prowess measurement, the time was the lunch break, to fill up the empty bellies and wait for the next part of the exam.

As expected, Jin Seh-Hahn was eating alone while sitting far away from the other cadets. But unlike before, he wasn't saddened by this. When he thought about it, he had no reason to feel depressed because others avoided him. Better still, no minor annoyances would bother him like this. Definitely not a made-up justification, it was. Never.

"Mister Jin Seh-Hahn?"

Suddenly, he heard a smooth and beautiful voice coming from his back. Taken by surprise just a tad, he turned around to look, and found a pair of boy and girl staring at him.

They were... the ones he memorised as the 'handsome couple', and their names were Yi Yu-Jin and Goh Yun-Jong.

"Is it fine if we sit here?" (Yi Yu-Jin)

Since it was not a crime to do so, Jin Seh-Hahn/Kim Sae-Jin lightly nodded his head.

"By the way, your Trait seems really great. How amazing." (Yi Yu-Jin)

As soon as she sat down, Yi Yu-Jin began speaking to him. The way she spoke was open and refreshing, as if she was a man among men or something.

"It's uncool to ask about another person's Trait, you know." (Goh Yun-Jong)

And Goh Yun-Jong stopped her with a friendly, gentle voice as he sat down next to her. It was kind of like, the role of a boy and a girl had reversed somewhat...

"I know that already. But like I'm saying, if he gives us just a tiny

bit of a hint, then the rest of us cadets would be grateful..." (Yi Yu-Jin)

Stopping her words temporarily, Yi Yu-Jin shoved a quarter of rice on top of her food tray into her mouth. What a truly manly man she was.

"Gulp. So? How about it? Surely, there will be team assignments coming soon, so if you let me know, we'll help you out." (Yi Yu-Jin)

Jin Seh-Hahn/Kim Sae-Jin silently studied the confident girl before slowly opening his mouth.

"What do you want to know?"

"Oh~. How refreshing, just like your beard. The thing is, it's nothing much, really. That punch that blew away the Gnoll before – is that a one-time use thing, or can you use it nonstop?" (Yi Yu-Jin)

""

After figuring that Yi Yu-Jin was wishing it to be a one-time use attack...

"It's the former." (Sae-Jin)

...Sae-Jin replied thus. Since it didn't matter even if he answered differently anyway.

"Oh, what a relief... No, that's not what I meant..." (Yi Yu-Jin)

"Mhm. So this was where all of you were."

Out of the blue, yet another person approached the table. This time, it was a devastatingly handsome and graceful young man, his black hair slightly dancing in the air.

"...And what the f*ck do you want here?" (Yi Yu-Jin)

As if their relationship wasn't good, Yi Yu-Jin sharply shot back at this guy.

"We are all cadets here, right? So, we can share a meal together."

However, the man whose name was Kim Myoung-Hahn, let out a slick smile and sat down on the empty seat.

"Well, then. You are Mister Jin Seh-Hahn, yes? My name is Kim Myoung-Hahn. I saw your Trait at work just now. Wow, that was quite something else. Even I was really surprised by it."

He spoke in a somewhat polite tone. Although there were traces of jealousy and wariness hidden in his words, to Sae-Jin, it was not much more than this boy acting rather cute.

"....Is that so?" (Sae-Jin)

"Indeed. And so, that is why... if it's not too much trouble, whether that punch is a single-use or not..." (Kim Myoung-Hahn)

Even this guy was asking about the exact same thing as Yi Yu-Jin. After making a half-hearted reply, Sae-Jin let out a long sigh.

He realised once more that these kids weren't even proper Knights yet; they were still a bunch of little chicks.

'They wouldn't even be able to open their mouths if they met the real me out in the society...' (Sae-Jin)

He found it a bit tough getting used to talking to these little chicks, after having kept company with big shots like Kim Yu-Rin, Joo Ji-Hyuk, Kim Yu-Sohn, Yi Hye-Rin, Yu Sae-Jung, etc, etc...

"...But, watching them fight over their rankings like this is kinda adorable, too." (Sae-Jin)

"Oi, why do I need to stare at your ugly mug while I eat?" (Yi Yu-Jin)

"But that isn't a problem, no?" (Kim Myoung-Hahn)

Having an uncomfortable expression as she glared at Kim Myoung-Hahn in front of her – Yi Yu-Jin. Receiving her hostile stares with much gracefulness and leisure, Kim Myoung-Hahn.

"...You shouldn't fight during a meal, you know?" (Goh Yun-Jong)

And Goh Yun-Jong, who was busy trying to stop the two.

It was kind of interesting looking at these three. As they once said, among all the fights out there, the most fun one to observe was the one about food, after all.

< 29. Eden, The Tower of Knights (1) > Fin.

Chapter 98: Eden, The Tower of Knights (2)

"I thought you'd take up residence in the dormitory, too... well, whatever, see you tomorrow." (Yi Yu-Jin)

"Let's all pass this thing together, everyone." (Goh Yun-Jong)

Exams had come to an end for the day; the sky above had darkened before they realised it – 8 o'clock in the evening. Yi Yu-Jin and Goh Yun-Jong spoke their piece and headed towards the dormitory located in the Tower of Eden.

Jin Seh-Hahn casually waved his hand and said his goodbyes, before making his way towards a deserted back alley quite a distance away from Eden. There, he changed back to Kim Sae-Jin and headed back home.

When he arrived, he found Yu Sae-Jung waiting for him as usual.

However, saying that she was waiting for him at home was a bit incorrect now.

Two toothbrushes in the bathroom; a huge king-sized bed much bigger than two people could ever occupy, located in the main bedroom, alongside a bedside dressing table; several high-heels within the shoe cabinet and two closets in the walk-in change room. His house that was entirely too big for a single man to live in had been filled up now, somewhat.

So, at this point in time, it'd be more accurate to say they were living together now, or maybe it was more like this was a newly-weds' home instead.

"You came?"

While wearing a pair of cute bunny slippers, Yu Sae-Jung came to the entrance to welcome him home. He took off his coat and handed it over, and like a practiced housewife, she took it to the wash basket. "Ha-ah..."

Kim Sae-Jin let out a long sigh as he lied down on the living room couch. She then stealthily approached him without getting noticed and began shooting him a faked resentful sideways glance.

"The work you've been doing must be keeping you busy? I mean, you left at 8 in the morning, only to return now."

"...Yeah, kinda."

Kim Sae-Jin smiled bitterly. This feeling of his body being numb and fatigued, he hadn't felt it for a long time. Well, his actual physical condition was quite fine, but his mind was completely tired out. After all, it wasn't a relaxing vacation to find himself in the middle of 200 or so people while busy minding their glares and eavesdropping on others bad mouthing him.

"I'm feeling really sleepy..."

While yawning out, he checked out the time. It was 9 in the evening. In around three hours, he'd have to assume the Monster Forms and wander around outside so he didn't have much time left.

"...Heu mm."

Yu Sae-Jung carefully observed him with meaningful gaze before jumping into his arms.

"Don't give up, Oppa. Whenever you need the Dawn's aid, just tell me. I'll be able to do something, if it's up to somewhere around a member of a parliament... Well, of course it's my grandpa who's going to do something, but if I ask him nicely, he won't be able to refuse me."

Within Sae-Jin's embrace, she began fidgeting and showed a lot of aegyo. She looked so adorable acting like this, even as tired as he was, Sae-Jin just had to smile warmly at the sight.

He then realised why people went through so much trouble and

pursued romance, seeing how comfortable he felt when someone was beside him and giving him encouragements.

"...Thank you." (Sae-Jin)

Kim Sae-Jin wholeheartedly thanked her and pulled in closer. His body was definitely bigger than hers, yet he felt safe and comfortable as if he was the one being hugged tightly.

"What's the point of being thankful, though? You haven't even told me yet what you're doing until now." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Quickly seizing this chance, Yu Sae-Jung began acting like a spoiled child. However, Sae-Jin remained as firm as an iron wall.

"...That... Later. When you grow to like me even more, I'll tell you everything. Absolutely everything." (Sae-Jin)

Of course, he would have to tell her everything sooner or later.

But to him, precisely because she was his girlfriend, he found it hard to tell her the truth.

There was the matter of him changing into different Monsters, but more importantly, he had to be mindful of her status as the heir of the Dawn dynasty.

Technically speaking, he was a completely different 'species' compared to her. Although the passage of time might have softened his stance, a certain anecdote still made rounds, the one about the Dawn's Chairman declaring to the world that his precious granddaughter would never marry a foreigner or her name would be removed from the Yu family register altogether.

She was someone he had to treasure more than anyone else out there, which only gave rise to several excuses to be reluctant about revealing the truth.

"But it's impossible to like you even more than now. you know? It's okay to tell me now, really!" (Yu Sae-Jung)

Totally oblivious to his inner thoughts, she maintained wide-

open eyes and dug deeper into his embrace, then began tickling his side.

"How many times should I say it? I like you a lot, I love you a lot..." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"I know. I know, so please, be still." (Sae-Jin)

Kim Sae-Jin embraced her tightly and stopped her from complaining.

And about five minutes of their hugging later.

"...Hm, hmm..."

Out of the blue, Yu Sae-Jung stealthily moved her hands and began fondling his b**t. At first, her movement was over the surface of his training pants, but then, her hands invaded under the fabric and...

"What are you doing?" (Sae-Jin)

Kim Sae-Jin narrowed his eyes at the odd fondling he could feel around his a*s.

"...Well, uh... just because you're tired, that doesn't mean you should go to bed right away... But what gives? Even though I didn't wanna do it, we still did it, but when it's me, you don't wanna?"

Yu Sae-Jung pouted and began fondling even more openly than before. As she did the deed many times with Sae-Jin, she had become quite more proactive compared to how she was like before.

"Fuhut. Hey, that tickles."

Kim Sae-Jin finally exploded into a fit of giggles while looking at her as she continued to rub her body against his thighs.

The time remaining for him to get a shut-eye was less than three hours, but... well, this monstrous body of his only needed a couple of hours to recover from all the fatigue anyway.

The exams for the Knights continued on.

The second trial consisted of the cadets trying to escape from a bizarre 'space' located within the Tower after they were imprisoned there. The space was incredibly huge after some type of expansion magic was cast on it, enlarging it; decorated to resemble the great wilderness, it contained countless Monsters, wild beasts as well as numerous dangerous traps.

And even trapped within this jungle-like environment, Jin Seh-Hahn/Kim Sae-Jin broke past all trials and tribulations with empty hands. When Monsters and vicious beasts appeared, he just twisted their necks off; if there was an obstruction blocking his way, he blew it away with a single punch; and thanks to his sharp perception, he never fell into such small things as traps.

In the midst of all this, Jin Seh-Hahn didn't forget the core of this test, 'cooperation'. If a fellow cadet was faced with danger, he helped out, and if another cadet fell into a trap, he helped out again.

"He's definitely a genius worthy of the first place in the current rankings."

And since Jin Seh-Hahn was completely unmatched within the criteria of judging cadets, every single one of the high-ranking officials from the various Knights Orders who came to observe the proceedings were busy licking their lips, lights of greed shining in their eyes.

"Most of all, it is quite wonderful to see him take care of the fellow cadets." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Even the Highest Knight from the Raven Order, Kim Yu-Rin, was among those.

"Agreed... But isn't his background somewhat suspicious?" (Oh Jung-Hyuk)

This careful objection was raised by Vice Order Master of the

Daebaek Knights Order, Oh Jung-Hyuk.

With his Knights Order's stock rising everyday, Oh Jung-Hyuk's shoulders had straightened quite a bit with pride nowadays. Of course, the reason for this rise in prominence was due to the title of 'only one of four Knights Orders in the country to possess an Athany doll' as well as being on friendly terms with The Monster Guild, so it was all dependent on the external factors.

But the truth was, new potential recruits began placing more and more emphasis on such points instead with every passing day.

"No fixed address, no known family members and a homeless bum to boot... But, his abilities are very good and judging from what he has shown so far, his personality seems also not bad." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Huhuh. Looks like Miss Yu-Rin still believes in people a little too easily. We do not know what kind of dark ambitions sleep within that man, and since he's a bum, he might even be blinded by wealth..."

Although Oh Jung-Hyuk was passionately and resolutely objecting to her evaluations, Yu-Rin had seen through his charade already. He might berate the person in question but on the day of the completion ceremony, without a doubt he'd proactively seduce Jin Seh-Hahn before anyone else had a chance.

"Well... if he has a dark side like what you've said, then I'm sure it'll be revealed in all good time." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Only one hour had passed since the test had begun.

There was no way she'd have enough free time to observe this test in entirety that was scheduled to last twelve hours, but still...

'I should tell Hye-Rin to keep an eye out on the guy.' (Kim Yu-Rin)

The story about the leader of the current pack of cadets being a very good seedling had been spreading around already, and now

that she had seen them, there were a few more that caught her eyes, so she needed to keep her wits about her and catch them.

*

After the 12 hours-long test came to an end, the majority of the cadets had fallen down to the ground like dead logs and panted heavily from the exhaustion. Among them who maintained the best condition were, of course, Jin Seh-Hahn, Yi Yu-Jin, and Kim Myoung-Hwan – the top three picks of the invited observers.

"Uhm, excuse me..."

In the midst of this, five hesitating cadets suddenly approached Jin Seh-Hahn/Kim Sae-Jin as he was loosening his neck as he sat in the cross-legged position. Although he didn't know their individual names, he still remembered their faces; he did rescue them from a trap earlier in the day, after all.

"What's up?" (Sae-Jin)

"...Well, that... we came to say.... thank you..."

Three boys and two girls lowered their heads hesitantly to express their gratitude. Jin Seh-Hahn/Kim Sae-Jin quietly gazed the group, and then...

"It's cool." (Sae-Jin)

He spoke that one line and stood up.

A thin smile spread on his lips. He thought that, although they spoke badly of him due to the sense of emptiness they all felt, these cadets still hadn't let their humanity rot away yet.

"Oh~, looks like Ahjussi's popularity is on the rise." (Yi Yu-Jin)

Meanwhile, the energetic Yi Yu-Jin and the half-dead Goh Yun-Jong approached him.

"Let's hurry up and eat!!"

"...I'm too tired to even eat..."

"Why do you complain all the time like a little girl, when you're supposed to be a man?!"

Jin Seh-Hahn headed towards the cafeteria with the arguing duo – although, it clearly was a one-sided grilling.

*

The tests continued afterwards. On the third day, it was about hunting Monsters. On the fourth day, a traditional boot camp. On the fifth day, a reenactment of historical events, etc, etc... Three more excruciatingly painful days passed by, at least from the perspective of the cadets.

During this time period, the original number of 205 participants were reduced to mere 75. The rankings 205th to 76th had been all disqualified.

On the other hand, Jin Seh-Hahn continued his stranglehold on the 1st spot with a five-point margin over the 2nd place; meanwhile, Yi Yu-Jin and Kim Myoung-Hahn constantly fought over the 2nd and 3rd place, only a single point separating the two.

And so, on the sixth day.

Jin Seh-Hahn/Kim Sae-Jin was eating together with Yi Yu-Jin and her circle of "friends" after getting more friendlier with one another. Well, it wasn't really about them getting more friendly, but actually, it was Yi Yu-Jin who one-sidedly approached him purely out of competitive spirit.

"...So, even Ahjussi is going to volunteer for a spot in Eden?" (Yi Yu-Jin)

As they ate, he even found something in common with Yi Yu-Jin. And that was, their ultimate destination being Eden.

"That's right." (Sae-Jin)

"How uncommon. To see two Knights from the same evaluation apply to enter Eden... Huhuh, well, I'll be. As long as people like

you two exist, dreams, hopes and ideals will never perish, I guess." (Kim Myoung-Hahn)

At Kim Myoung-Hahn's cynical taunts, Yi Yu-Jin's forehead creased up in irritation.

"Why can't you just shut the f*ck up. No wait, just get the hell away from me." (Yi Yu-Jin)

"Hahah. I was simply stating the truth. What would you do, if you fail to enter Eden and become a repeat test taker...?" (Kim Myoung-Hahn)

With the reason of having a firm 'conviction', Eden disapproved of wanting to enter other Knights Orders. So, in the case one applied to enter Eden but failed – well, while carrying the sadness of knowing one would never be able to enter Eden, one had to become a repeat test taker and wait until the following year's February.

"...Fuu. Ahjussi, just ignore that b*****d, and let's duel against each other in good faith. Even though my ranking is lower than yours, you know this too, right? That the final test gives out the highest scores. There will be enough chances for me to reverse the rankings soon enough." (Yi Yu-Jin)

Jin Seh-Hahn/Kim Sae-Jin simply replied with a smile.

While they were conversing away in a not-very important topic, the door to the cafeteria opened and the instructor entered. The new instructor was also someone Sae-Jin could recognise – Kim In-Soo, the Knight who was trying to show off before getting properly schooled by Sae-Jin way back when.

Sae-Jin nearly laughed out loudly when he saw In-Soo's face, but held it back somehow. His cheeks were so chubby now – just how did he gain so much weight?

"How do you do, ladies and gentlemen. I'm a High Tier Knight from the Genesis Order, Kim In-Soo." Proportional to the increase in the girth of his body, his Tier had increased by another level as well.

"We'll start the test for the sixth day soon. And the test for the day is – dueling in front of the observers. With the observers from the various Knights Orders watching you, you will duel against other cadets on the duel arena." (Kim In-Soo)

Right away, cadets tensed up. Obviously, a duel would best demonstrate the combat abilities of Knights, but actually, the end results depended heavily on who the opponents were.

"There will be two types of duels. Firstly, cadets will compete with each other. In this case, the 1st spot in the rankings will have the first choice, and the cadet chosen by the 1st spot will naturally lose his or her right to chose." (Kim In-Soo)

The cadets suddenly began checking out the mood of Sae-Jin's table where the first three rankers were seated.

However, Yi Yu-Jin was only staring hard at Jin Seh-Hahn's direction. Because, this was the chance to reverse the rankings that she had mentioned just now.

"And the second duel will be against an expert. In order to accurately measure your abilities, we secured the aid of someone quite beautiful and important this time." (Kim In-Soo)

" "

Wait a d**n minute.

Kim Sae-Jin suddenly had a bad premonition. He began recollecting the conversation he had with Yu Sae-Jung about two days ago.

- I decided to do a job my dad asked me to do, as a commemoration of me becoming a upper Mid Tier.
- But you became a upper Mid Tier because of my Tattoos, though... Okay, fine. What kind of a job is it?

- ...Well, Oppa did help me out there, that's true. But whatever, the thing is, quite a few talented newbie Knights are showing up, so... Ah, it's a secret. Oppa doesn't want to tell me his, so this will be my secret.

At the time, Sae-Jin didn't think much about it, but...

"That expert is the world's youngest upper Mid Tier Knight, the Dawn Knights Order's Miss Yu Sae-Jung." (Kim In-Soo)

At this unexpected announcement of a celebrity arriving soon, all the cadets carried a stunned expression.

Among them, Jin Seh-Hahn's facial change was particularly honest.

< 29. Eden, The Tower of Knights (2) > Fin.

Chapter 99: Eden, The Tower of Knights (3)

"Ahjussi, do it with me." (Yi Yu-Jin)

As soon as Kim In-Soo turned around and left, Yi Yu-Jin asked Sae-Jin for a fight.

On the seventh day, which would be the next day, it was reserved for things like measuring of Mana and Magic strength, psychological tests, and having interviews with Knights Orders, so realistically, this was it for her to reverse the rankings. However, Yi Yu-Jin looked a bit anxious, since if Sae-Jin refused, then that would be the end.

•••

Unfortunately, Jin Seh-Hahn/Kim Sae-Jin was dazedly staring at the empty air and didn't reply to her request. Feeling a little frustrated, Yi Yu-Jin grasped his arm and shook it. Only then, he turned his head towards her direction.

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"Let's do it." (Yi Yu-Jin)

"...Do what?" (Sae-Jin)

"The duel." (Yi Yu-Jin)

"Uh... Ah... Sure thing." (Sae-Jin)
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At his easier-than-expected agreement, her expressions turned weird. But that only lasted for a short while. She began energetically smiling.

"As expected, Ahjussi is really manly and straight forward! No backing out now, right?" (Yi Yu-Jin)

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"Yeah, sure." (Sae-Jin)
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And so, the meal time came to an end and the cadets started performing light exercises to prepare for the upcoming duels.

One hour later.

All the remaining cadets gathered at a huge dueling arena on the fourth floor of the Tower.

Kim In-Soo told the cadets to greet the observers hidden from the view, and so, they bent their backs 90 degrees. That signaled the beginning of the duels.

Most cadets thought that the procession might become rather tedious as there were a fair number of participants, but when the things actually got going, every battle lasted only for a way, way too brief moment.

No, that didn't mean high-ranked cadets chose to fight against a low-ranked ones, though. The thing was, these high-ranked cadets were mindful of the scoring system and so, they tried not to fight against opponents with too low a rank, but then, many low-ranked cadets who were confident of their chances in duel began provoking the high ranked ones instead, and somehow, successfully got the duels going.

SFX for lights (?) falling

"...Ohhh."

A flash of light shooting out from Goh Yun-Jong's blade melted a nameless male cadet's sword, thereby ending the 35th duel. And it had been only 25 minutes after the start of this whole duel thing.

"The 9th ranked, Goh Yun-Jong, winner."

"Nicely done!" (Yi Yu-Jin)

Elated by the victory of her friend, Yi Yu-Jin stood up from her seat and shouted out loudly.

"Next, Yi Yu-Jin and Jin Seh-Hahn. Come up on the arena."

Her joy only lasted for a brief moment, however. As soon as her name was called out, her face became incomparably stiff.

Jin Seh-Hahn/Kim Sae-Jin made his way up on the arena first and she followed him up soon after.

As the two of them faced against each other, different lines of thoughts flowed in their minds.

"...Now how should I handle this? Do it with one punch, just like until now?" (Sae-Jin)

'Surely, he has no experience in duels like this, so I must not give him time to get organised and attack him right away... But, something doesn't feel right. Maybe, I should take my time, and wait for a gap...' (Yi Yu-Jin)

It was kind of obvious that Yi Yu-Jin's thoughts were a lot more weighty compared to her opponent's.

*

"Who do you think will win?"

Observers couldn't hide their excitement as the main match was about to get under way.

"I still believe Yi Yu-Jin would win this one. Yi Yu-Jin might have graduated from the Academy at a younger age than Yu Sae-Jung, but she's a Knight who is willing to become a repeat test taker just for an opportunity to enter Eden. There should be quite a gap between the two as far as actual combat strength is concerned."

Observers spoke out their own educated opinions. Someone said that, after using a special finishing move, the duel would end quickly, judging by what had gone before. Some disagreed and said their skill levels were similar so it might continue on for at least 5 minutes...

But in the midst of this, out of the blue, a shout loud enough to shock everyone into stupor exploded out from the arena below them.

"...That's the end! The 1st ranked, Jin Seh-Hahn, winner!"

Even the referee's voice was trembling, as if he was confused

somewhat.

"...What was that?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Stunned by that sudden, unexpected announcement, Kim Yu-Rin quickly got up from her seat and with her own two eyes, checked the situation at the dueling arena. There was Yi Yu-Jin toppled over, clutching her stomach, while standing in front, Jin Seh-Hahn looking at the girl, his fist clenched tight.

The duel was clearly over.

"...Keum." (Sae-Jin)

Jin Seh-Hahn/Kim Sae-Jin scratched the back of his neck, looking embarrassed slightly. He wasn't planning to finish things up this fast... but even he didn't expect Yi Yu-Jin to madly dash towards him, and so, he ended up swinging his fist.

And the result of that simple punch was this.

"...*pant*... groan..."

Yi Yu-Jin was drooling all over the ground while unable to recover her wits; meanwhile, all the other cadets were dumbfoundedly staring at him.

"M, my luck is pretty good, eh. Didn't expect you to move the way I wanted you to. Really, my luck is the best." (Sae-Jin)

...He felt the need to say something under those intense gazes, so, he did.

*

After the first stage of the duel had come to an end, cadets rested their bodies while waiting for the expert's arrival.

Jin Seh-Hahn/Kim Sae-Jin continuously chugged down bottles of water as he got nervous about running into Yu Sae-Jung. On the side, Yi Yu-Jin remained silent, totally downtrodden. There were traces of tears on the corners of her eyes, even.

"Oh, wowsers!!"

It was then, Yu Sae-Jung made her entrance.

She was, without a doubt, an idol.

Not only the quietly-seated cadets stood up quickly in order to take a good look at her, even the referee for the duel, Kim In-Soo, stood there totally dazed as he gazed at the woman who seemed to exhibit a bit more mature charm than before.

SFX for soles of high heels making noise

Despite coming to duel, Yu Sae-Jung wore a pair of high-heels. She ascended the arena and spoke while sweeping her gaze over the cadets.

"...My evaluation standard is straightforward. If you can withstand one strike from me, I'll give you a fair amount of score." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Yu Sae-Jung's attitude was incredibly cold and distant, which was completely different from when she was with Sae-Jin in private.

"Since I don't have a lot of time, let's start quickly, from the bottom. The last person in the rankings, please come up." (Yu Sae-Jung)

And the second half of the duels – or, in this case, 'guidance', began in this manner and ended faster than the first half. None of the 70 or so cadets could receive Yu Sae-Jung's strike with a wooden sword, so the whole thing only needed about ten minutes or so.

There were six different types of Magic Tattoos inscribed on her small and petite frame; Sae-Jin finally got to see for himself just what kind of a mini-monster he had inadvertently created here.

[&]quot;Next... Yi Yu-Jin?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

[&]quot;Yes, here~!"

Yi Yu-Jin replied back loudly and quickly dashed forward. Although there was only a two-year gap between the two, seeing the overwhelming appearance of her role model, twinkling lights had returned in full force within her eyes.

"Well then, shall we get started?" (Yi Yu-Jin)

Yu Sae-Jung spoke as she lightly swung the wooden sword. Although it looked light and weak, the amount of pressure Yi Yu-Jin felt crashing down on her was far beyond her expectations.

"Uh-aht!!"

Yi Yu-Jin let out a strange shout and somehow, was able to endure the strike by the skin of her teeth.

Yu Sae-Jung began counting up to five while maintaining the strength and Mana she imbued in the sword, and then withdrew the weapon.

"Heu uh uh..."

Becoming dead-tired after encountering that one attack, Yi Yu-Jin plopped down on the floor, her legs shaking uncontrollably.

"Very good." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Cadets began clapping their hands as the second person to pass after Kim Myoung-Hahn had appeared.

"Okay, and next is...?"

Finally, Kim Sae-Jin in Jin Seh-Hahn's disguise hesitantly entered the dueling arena.

But well, the way Yu Sae-Jung was staring at him seemed to indicate something was afoot.

"...Shall we?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"...Sure." (Sae-Jin)

Since Sae-Jin's voice had become deeper due to the Beastification, he was not too worried, but still... Quite strangely,

instead of attacking him, Yu Sae-Jung began to carefully study his facial features.

"Heu mm..."

He thought he might get discovered if this continued, so he rushed forward first, instead.

"…?!"

Her face, flushed with an unexpected surprise, and a wooden sword loaded with Mana coming down right afterwards.

Sae-Jin grasped that sword with his bare hand and stood there 'enduring' for about ten seconds, before determining that this should be enough and let go.

...

And to put the finishing touch, he deliberately let his legs tremble and plopped down on the floor as well.

Yu Sae-Jung narrowed her brows and stared at this guy, before opening her mouth.

"...Very good, but still..." (Yu Sae-Jung)

...This man, I feel like I've seen him before somewhere.

However, she didn't blurt out the words that might increase her time staying here. Going home early from one's duties would only make one feel good, after all.

"That's it for today, then. End of the test. I'll be on my way first." (Yu Sae-Jung)

While singing inwardly, she quickly moved her feet while happily imagining a certain someone potentially waiting for her back home.

*

And so, that was how the Knight evaluation test had come to a disappointing end.

Jin Seh-Hahn had refused all the earnest invitations from the various Knights Orders and volunteered to work for Eden; and currently, he was leisurely waiting for the reply that would arrive in a week's time.

The day was an ordinary Summer's Saturday, when the weather was really stuffy and the baking heat was infused into the blowing winds.

Inside the aircon-cooled house, Kim Sae-Jin was gently stroking the back of the sleeping Yu Sae-Jung while quietly thinking to himself.

'I wonder who might win in a fight between the Orc Chieftain and the Lycanthrope...'

...Well, his thoughts weren't all that important, though.

Whatever the case may have been, he was really enjoying these past couple days of peace. It was then, a beam of light shone from a certain crystal nearby. A magic communication from Kim Yu-Sohn had come in, so Sae-Jin hurriedly picked it up.

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"Hello."
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- "Sir, it's Kim Yu-Sohn."

"Yes."

Kim Yu-Sohn wasn't someone who'd contact him for no reason. His voice seemed heavier than normal as well.

- "I had a dream, sir."

""

Whenever he said that, Sae-Jin's heart felt like it would stop beating for a moment. A conditioned reflex he developed, where his anticipation and the dread of what might come next were blended together.

- "It seems that... going forward, the future might get a little difficult, sir."

- "Can you give me the details?"
- "I saw the scenes of countless boss-level Monsters flooding the world, sir. The monster bird from before was nothing more than just the beginning. And it's not just Korea, either when I saw the broken bits of news broadcast flashing by in my dreams, even the different distant countries will be suffering similar events."

Kim Sae-Jin became speechless as this revelation was just too sudden.

- "That is why, there's a great need for us to prepare from here onwards."
 - "...You say... preparations?"
- "Yes, sir. Within the basement of our Guild, we have numerous Goblins, as well as Griffins and Hero Orcs that grow stronger each passing day. However... these won't be enough going forward, at least from the visions I saw in my dream. I suggest we strengthen Knights Orders who are friendly with the Guild..."

Unlike his past self, Kim Yu-Sohn's words were lengthy, disorganised and hurried, which meant Sae-Jin couldn't quite grasp what the veteran Mercenary was trying to say.

There was a reason why Kim Yu-Sohn was feeling the urgency, however.

"Well, for now... I don't quite understand it but regardless, I shall do what Mister Kim Yu-Sohn has recommended. Please, talk to Mister Jo Hahn-Sung and set a plan of action for the future."

- "Yes, sir... I understand."

Kim Yu-Sohn replied powerlessly.

Calamities created heroes; Kim Sae-Jin and his Guild met the necessary conditions and possessed abilities to become exactly that; with Sae-Jin's abilities to pump out countless potions which would be highly sought-after in the upcoming troubled times, as

well as to craft fine weapons, Vampires and their sinister plans could be rendered all useless.

Plus, the fame, wealth and the honour of the Guild and its Master, Kim Sae-Jin, would literally shoot towards the heavens.

However, there was a thin line separating between a 'Hero' and a 'Monster'. One wrong step, and a hero would become a monster in no time.

And Kim Sae-Jin's mind wasn't really settled at the moment. In the dreams Yu-Sohn had every now and then, Sae-Jin was always worried and fearful. Maybe he couldn't sense it consciously, but his purest sense of self where his Human and Monster Forms were all blended into one and rooted deeply within, was certainly feeling that way.

"In that case, sir, I shall give you a call again after having a meeting with Mister Jo Hahn-Sung." (Kim Yu-Sohn)

- "Please do."

Kim Yu-Sohn ended the communication with those words and let out a long sigh.

The dream he experienced this time was quite lengthy. He could see the majority of it. That was why he remembered the words "回 光返照 (회광반조)". (TL: Hwee-Gwang-Ban-Joh. Sorry for leaving it in the raw Hanja form. The literal meaning is "the sun's light brightening up the sky just before it sets". Basically, one's mind clearing up moments before death, or something close to that effect.)

"...Kehuep!!"

Suddenly, he sensed something rushing out of his throat, so he quickly covered up his mouth with his hand. Dark crimson liquid escaped between his fingers and dripped down to the floor.

"...Keuheum."

After throwing up the blood, Yu-Sohn quietly gazed at the crimson stain on the floor. He could clearly feel that he didn't have much time left – this d**n Vampire's curse that was eating away what little life he had left.

'I hope that my son, Sun-Ho, can do a good job after I'm gone.'

Yu-Sohn had properly educated his son before all this, and he, Sun-Ho, was already performing a lot of work as the head of the Mercenaries. So, he'd have little trouble continuing on with his legacy.

But still, he seemed to have trouble dealing with Kim Sae-Jin.

Sae-Jin didn't mind letting someone else take charge. No, he was the type of person who actually welcomed it as long as there were no ulterior motives. This came about because of a lot of fear accumulating within him that made him worry about making the wrong decisions – especially more so, if the effects of his decisions could create large ripples.

"...I should create an opportunity for a sit-down soon."

With darkened eyes, Kim Yu-Sohn stared at the world outside the window. The bright and fine sunlight cascaded down to earth. It was truly a beautiful image, worthy to be titled the 'ordinary life'.

< 29. Eden, The Tower of Knights (3) > Fin.

Chapter 100: The Right Start (1)

After finishing up the magic communication with Kim Yu-Sohn, Sae-Jin shared breakfast with Yu Sae-Jung.

"Ah, right. Oppa, a few days ago, I saw a person who looked strangely like you."

Although his head was still aching due to the serious nature of the communication he had just now, those words coming out of Yu Sae-Jung's mouth held more than enough power to make him pay close attention.

"What do you mean by that...?" (Sae-Jin)

Feeling guilty, Sae-Jin responded as quick as the flash of light as soon as she finished saying her words.

"Ah, well, the thing is, I took on the job of an instructor for the Knight evaluation exams' duels. That's where I saw that person." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"...Really?"

"Mm. On top of that, even though he was supposed to be a cadet, I was really surprised because he was so much stronger than any other cadets there. Maybe it's true that there's a doppelganger resembling each of us out there somewhere. With Oppa, and that guy, it was really strange, you know? It was su~per interesting."

While speaking, Yu Sae-Jung took a sneaky glance at Sae-Jin's direction to see his reaction, whether he'd show some form of jealousy with this... However, all he did was put the spoon down rather coldly without showing an expression.

"...What's the matter? It doesn't taste good again?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

Seeing this, Yu Sae-Jung asked, slightly worried.

"Ah, no. It's not that, just.... Kinda curious, since you say he

resembles me. So, what happened to that cadet?" (Sae-Jin)

"Oh, that. Well, even I'm unhappy regarding that part. I was planning to persuade him at the completion ceremony, you know? But it turns out, he had already refused invitations from all the other Knights Orders, including the Raven. I asked around, and apparently, he's applying to enter Eden." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Really?"

She then nodded her head.

"Ng, right. Eden's entry barrier is uselessly tough, but then, their treatment of the members is lots worse when compared to the Dawn... Sure, your ranks might rise nice and easy during the evaluation exams since there's the special consideration applied when working for Eden, but still, I can't understand why he made a choice like that."

She began to sing like a canary all on her own. But she still hadn't spoken about the most important part yet.

"...So, does that mean Eden is going to drop him, then?" (Sae-Jin)

"Huh? What have you been listening to, Oppa? I said, even I was surprised by him, you know? He's obviously been accepted." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"For real?"

"Yeah. I asked directly, via my dad. I was planning to snag him after a half year's wait if he got dropped, but, oh well." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Maintaining the best poker-face he could make, Sae-Jin nodded.

It was done. As soon as he displayed an almighty growth without restraint and reach the upper Mid Tier, then...

"Oppa, you weren't listening to me again just now, were you? What were you thinking about? Is it another woman?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"...Huh?! What are talking about?"

"Didn't you say you are going somewhere with Hazeline Unni soon? Weren't you thinking about the trip?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

She was making a joke, but her words still contained a slight amount of her true feelings and a bit of worry.

"No way. Besides, that's just for business. You know, related to Alchemy..."

And so, at the sudden and swift change in the topic of conversation, Sae-Jin began hastily giving away his best excuses.

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One week later.

Just like the Yu Sae-Jung's spoiler, Kim Sae-Jin could become an honoured Knight of Eden as Jin Seh-Hahn. It seemed that the Eden's insignia, made out of pure platinum, possessed a certain magnetic charm that made Knights of other top Orders take envious glances at its wearers.

"Ahjussi, let's do a good job."

Standing right next to him during the accolade, the knighting ceremony, was Yi Yu-Jin. He still could clearly remember that after getting defeated at the duels, she cried her eyes out with the thought of failing to enter Eden taking a toll on her. However, her sole aim for the past six years studying in the Academy was just to enter Eden and it seemed such a conviction was rated highly enough by the management of Eden in the end.

"...." (Sae-Jin)

"We'll be seeing each other lots more in the future, so I don't think it's okay to not say anything to your colleague, though?" (Yi Yu-Jin)

During the accolade as well as after its end, when they were walking out of the Tower, Yi Yu-Jin yapped on and on nonstop.

But her chattiness couldn't continue on forever.

"They are coming out!"

The matter of two Knights emerging from a single exam who got accepted by Eden, was a great source of pride for the whole country, especially considering that there was only one successful entrant in the last three years.

"...What the hell is this?" (Yi Yu-Jin)

Already, countless reporters were camping out in front of the Tower. Yi Yu-Jin and Kim Sae-Jin both narrowed their brows at the same time as the camera flashes exploded all around the two and loud shouts disguised as questions were thrown at them.

"But they never entered the Tower's grounds before..." (Yi Yu-Jin)

"Both of you! We'd like to hear your thoughts on becoming Eden's Knights!!" (Unnamed reporter 1)

"We heard that the Knight Jin Seh-Hahn was originally a homeless..." (Unnamed reporter 2)

"Knight Yi Yu-Jin, please turn your pretty face this way!!" (Unnamed reporter 3)

...Sae-Jin had always felt this, but the people from the station MBS who asked that last question were truly a swarm of smelly houseflies.

"Wow, just what is the heck this?" (Yi Yu-Jin)

Yi Yu-Jin panicked and stopped moving as the huge wave of people descended down on her. It was then, Kim Sae-Jin, as Jin Seh-Hahn, sent a meaningful gaze towards her and bravely stepped forward. In all honesty, though, there was no bravery involved here. He had done so many press conferences already, it was like they had become a part of his life at this point in time.

"He's coming!" (Another unnamed reporter)

The waves of reporters then diverted towards Jin Seh-Hahn instead.

"Please tell us your thoughts!!"

"Are you satisfied with becoming an Eden's Knight?"

"What are your goals, hey move aside, man!! Now that you've become an Eden's Knight... your goal.... Eu ark!! Help!"

"My goal is... Let's rescue that guy first before he's crushed to death." (Sae-Jin)

"Whew-woo. T, thank you very much." (Unnamed reporter)

"My goal is quite simple. It's to rise to upper Mid Tier within the next six months." (Sae-Jin)

Kim Sae-Jin had no need to lie, nor did he feel like lying in the first place. That was why, on this occasion, he replied truthfully with words that were honest from his perspective, but from the views of the gathered reporters, rather gallant and arrogant.

For a short moment – for about one second or so, the stillness ruled the world. But soon enough, countless camera flashes went off once more. While busy snapping Sae-Jin's pictures, these reporters were already cooking up headlines that could cause the maximum amount of controversy.

An Eden's Knight received more advantages in comparison to other Knights within the same Tier. After all, successfully entering Eden meant that one's abilities and future potential were greater than the others.

But still, becoming a upper Mid Tier Knight within six months? Even a Knight possessing heaven-defying talent and Trait could not hope to achieve such a feat.

"Hahaha. That is quite a bold declaration!! What will follow after that? The world's greatest Knight? Or better still, the King of the Knights?" (Reporter) "I aim to become a High Tier Knight within one year. Ah, right. When I say one year, I didn't mean one year after the six months spent in becoming a upper Mid Tier. It's one year from now." (Sae-Jin)

Seemingly unaffected by the sarcastic tone of the reporter's question, Sae-Jin boldly replied. And the intensity of the camera flashes and questions only increased afterwards.

"Uh-whew..."

Using the gap created by the attention of reporters drawn towards Jin Seh-Hahn, Yi Yu-Jin could finally escape the human barrier.

"Yu-Jin~."

And then, Goh Yun-Jong, who was waiting at some distance away, approached her with a welcoming smiling that suited his personality to a T.

"...What are you doing here? Are you waiting for me? You sure do like to waste your time, don't you?" (Yi Yu-Jin)

Acting in an attitude rather contrary to what the bright smile blooming on her face indicated, Yu-Jin put her arm around the shoulder of Goh Yun-Jong who had a similar height as her.

"Let's get out of here. As a celebration of becoming Eden's Knights, I'll buy us a really expensive meal." (Yi Yu-Jin)

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[A new Knight of Eden, Jin Seh-Hahn, aiming to become the best Knight in the world within a year...]

[Rising past the High Tier and into the Highest within a year? The confident new addition to the Eden's ranks.]

On the following day, news articles like the above flooded the airwaves.

As expected, all the Knights in various Orders were outraged.

"...Isn't he a crazy a*shole?" (Disgruntled Knight 1)

"Not only crazy, but a g*****n fraud, too." (Disgruntled Knight 2)

For these folks, they could become a Knight only after sacrificing their most-important developing teenage years under the pretext of training. But now, a bloody hobo who seemingly had never put in effort in anything was looking down on the rest of Knights, simply because he awakened a nice Trait?

"A b*****d who doesn't even have any skills... When is he going to show up at our Order?"

Normally, an Eden's Knight was given the right to enter or leave any Knights Orders in the country, as they were seen as the so-called "All-Purpose Knight". Of course, the Eden's Knights could only enter non-restricted areas such as cafeterias and training grounds, but if the need arose, it was possible for them to partake in missions together with the Knights from other Orders.

"When he shows up, I'm going to rip him up a new one during a duel." (Disgruntled Knight 3)

...And so, the man who was being bad mouthed by not only the Knights in the Dawn Order but by practically everyone else in the country, Jin Seh-Hahn/Kim Sae-Jin was in the midst of leisurely attending a callout.

As if he was flying in the sky, he kicked the ground and soared up high, arriving at the outskirts of the Gangwon Province.

SFX for a loud roar of a Monster

His target this time was a pair of Troll 'brothers' who were causing havoc on a road with the marking 'School' painted on. No one knew how these two Monsters had made their way this far, but to Sae-Jin, this event was nothing more than a day's work to fill up his performance quota.

[&]quot;Kyaaaahck!!"

"Eu ah ahrk!!"

The students leaving school to head back home began scattering away as soon as the Trolls appeared, but still, a handful of girls couldn't do that as they fell on the ground, fear robbing them of their leg strength. All they could do was to cry endlessly while hoping that this was just a bad dream.

SFX for pitiful sobbing

A large shadow drew upon a female student who was busy massaging her twisted ankle as she sobbed pitifully. Through her eyes, only open in a narrow slit, she confirmed the horrifying arm of the Troll raised up high into the sky. It was impossible for her to think any further than this. Her head was blanking out...

SFX for a loud explosion

The road trembled at the powerful shock wave.

And then, the Troll's arm raised up high began falling back down rather weakly.

Kkhoong-

A Troll collapsed on its knees; and sensing something was wrong, the female student opened her tightly-shut eyes ever so carefully.

She saw the back of a certain man. It was the type of back that was so broad and dependable, the type that restored the peace of mind.

"Ah...."

When the female student let out a soft gasp of astonishment, the dude took a glance towards her. To her, this man looked like a model from overseas, no, a piece of an artwork, even with the lengthy beard that could be seen as a definite minus point by all women.

"Run away now." (Sae-Jin)

After speaking out those simple yet weighty words, he stepped

forward towards the remaining Troll. Watching him preparing for a fierce battle, even the Troll became tensed up and it let out a loud roar.

SFX for a loud roar

But Kim Sae-Jin didn't back away. Only that, he poured all his power to take the next step forward and then, shot out like a bullet towards the Monster.

SFX for yet another loud roar of a Troll

The Troll responded by punching out.

And so, a gigantic fist and a comparably puny hand met in the middle.

However, the winner of this encounter was rather plainly obvious.

The moment the two fists met, the Troll's hand and the arm simply crumbled like a piece of soft tofu. After losing its limb with only a single strike, the Troll staggered about disoriented, but then got its heart pierced by the subsequent punch and died on the spot.

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The street once filled with screams had now fallen utterly silent. Every citizen present dazedly stared at the bearded man.

"Keum..."

However, the bearded man did a fake cough as if he was embarrassed by all the attention he had garnered, and he quickly kicked the ground and left the area towards a destination unknown.

Like a flittering mirage under the broad daylight, all these events had come to its swift conclusion less than one minute later. It didn't take too long a time to confirm what Kim Yu-Sohn's dream was all about.

The time now was two weeks after Kim Sae-Jin had killed the two Trolls with the new identity as the Eden's Knight.

Just about every headlines appearing on newspapers and broadcasts were shouting "Monster assault incidents". Throughout every corner of the country, from the densely-populated cities to sparse rural areas, on average, 40 incidents of Monsters assaulting citizens broke out and over 300 people lost their lives every day.

The world quivered in fear at this unexplainable situation.

However, during the time of unrest, heroes were destined to be born.

[This time, also the Knight of Eden, Jin Seh-Hahn? Solo killing an Ogre that appeared in the city of Gangwon.]

[The advent of a new hero... A Knight who used to be a hobo; the reason why attention focuses on Jin Seh-Hahn.]

The media couldn't control their excitement at the timely advent of a new hero.

Possessing an unrivalled macho fighting style where he would kill any Monster with a single punch. And with a sad backstory of being a homeless; then, not pursuing wealth and instead choosing Eden; a man with a dramatic life and overflowing with righteous conviction.

Almost all the media outlets beautifully played around with all of these facts and thanks to that, only after three weeks since he began his activity, Jin Seh-Hahn had become the hottest news item in South Korea.

Although, the truth was that many Knights still denounced him as a 'manufactured hero', remembering that 'arrogant' interview Jin Seh-Hahn gave after the accolade.

Whatever. His fame and popularity soared higher everyday. And his particular fighting style also attracted the attention of the Knight Academy.

"We at the Academy would like to utilise the footage of your battle style.... but will it be okay with you? Oh, of course, we will pay you the appropriate royalties as well." (Academy official)

Eden was seen as an 'All-Purpose' Knights Order, so its Knights had the qualifications to participate in any and all events related to Monsters. However, such qualifications meant that there were responsibilities to handle as well. Jin Seh-Hahn had to meet a representative from the Knights Academy at the request of Eden's higher-ups.

"...You say, my footage?" (Sae-Jin)

"Yes. Mister Jin Seh-Hahn's fighting style has, in its own unique way, has its own uses, and it's also popular currently as well, so... Our thoughts are, by using the footage of your fighting style as an educational material, won't we be able to bring forth a positive change? Ah, and also, there's the matter of profits earned from royalties. We don't hold normal type of classes but instead, they are structured as an one-on-one lecture with an instructor and so, students can choose which classes they enter. Parents seems to go with the flow of popularity, so if we take into account the fame of Mister Jin Seh-Hahn... well, I believe the profit should be substantial." (Academy official)

Not thinking too deeply, Jin Seh-Hahn just nodded his head. If, because of him, the talents of young cadets could blossom, then wouldn't that be a good thing, all things considered? Of course, the truth of the matter was, the 'fist attack' was simply a 'bonus' derived from the Skill 'Weapon Mastery', but still.... If someone wished to follow in his footsteps, then surely, there would be someone out there who might be able to.

"Yeah, sure. Let's do it." (Sae-Jin)

"Oh!!"

The representative of the Academy didn't have as simple line of thought as Sae-Jin did, so it couldn't be helped that he got deeply stunned by Jin Seh-Hahn/Kim Sae-Jin easily agreeing to it.

Now normally, most Knights tried their best to avoid showing the footage of their battles publically the higher their Tiers rose. The excuse given was that their weaknesses could be revealed to the world, but really, it would not feel all that nice to see someone else 'copying' their moves.

But this Jin Seh-Hahn readily agreed to it. Despite the fact that he could remain as a unique individual, he didn't even put forward any other conditions. Even with this much, the representative had so much to be thankful for... but what he heard next made his jaw drop all the way to the floor.

"By the way, I don't need the royalties." (Sae-Jin)

His reason was simple. He just had too much money right now. Actually, he would not be able to exhaust it even if he spent it willy-nilly right up until his death...

"Instead, make lectures with my footage free to attend, or give cadets scholarships with it." (Sae-Jin)

""

The representative forgot his words.

This day, he felt it right down to his bones. That beard, goatee, those thick lines of his face, that fierce look – they were nothing but a mere shell. This man's true personality was just like that of a generous saint, something that couldn't be compared to anyone...

"Well, if that is all." (Sae-Jin)

After letting the representative taste a new and fresh type of shock, Jin Seh-Hahn rose up from his seat.

To realise how wrong he was when he blindly pursued the ideals

of unchecked Capitalism – the Academy official felt a huge pang of remorse as he continued to longingly gaze at the departing back of Jin Seh-Hahn.

< 30. The Right Start (1) > Fin.

Chapter 101: The Right Start (2)

"The profession of Alchemy is all about creating value out of things that are of little worth by themselves. Not only is it a platform for concocting potions but also..."

Every single person present here wore thick hoods covering their heads like a bunch of criminals – and here being, a conference organised by the Alchemy Association. And as expected, it was quite a boring affair. It wasn't only Sae-Jin who thought like this, but his companion sitting next to him, Hazeline, also thought so as well, judging by how often she yawned out and sighed deeply as the proceedings continued.

"Just when is this going to end?" (Sae-Jin)

The reason why he attended this conference as the Master of the Guild and not as the Goblin Alchemist, was rather simple.

The efforts of the Goblin Alchemist had stirred up the other Alchemists and that led to the Korean potion market going through an unprecedented boom right now. And so, with a surplus of potion supplies locally, he was planning to export to overseas markets that were suffering from acute potion shortages.

"...Please wait for a little while longer. It'll be our turn soon to announce the 'innovative new plan' of the Goblin Alchemist. As soon as that's done, we'll leave." (Hazeline)

He continued to yawn out while waiting for their turn to come. And so, five minutes passed by, then ten minutes, then another twenty.... his valuable time was slowly bleeding away.

"There is currently a certain Alchemist who is receiving a lot of attention from all over the world, and he is the Goblin Alchemist. One or two among us here have either called him the inheritor of Rodes's legacy, or as the revolutionary of the Alchemical profession."

"Well, I should get going now. When I call for you, Mister Sae-Jin should come up to the stage and read off the script we prepared before." (Hazeline)

Hazeline lightly tapped Sae-Jin's shoulder and while lowering her head, disappeared off to somewhere.

"And now, we would like to welcome the manager of the Yoseon Alchemy House, who had discovered that very Alchemist, to the stage."

Hazeline walked up on the stage. As Alchemists didn't enjoy raising loud ruckus, not one of them clapped hands. Only that, a handful of them shot gazes of envy and jealousy towards the stage.

"Ke, keum."

Her entire body hidden under a thick robe, Hazeline surveyed the surroundings for a bit before swallowing down her saliva.

"....H, h, h, hello. E, e, e, e, everyone."

...And then, a catastrophe began unfolding.

*

Hazeline and Kim Sae-Jin made their announcement of exporting the Goblin Alchemist's potions overseas. As expected of a Dark Elf who had never stepped on a stage in front of so many people, Hazeline's speech was all over the place, full of stuttering and going off topic constantly. But since it was seen as a normal thing, Alchemists simply accepted the presentation without much problem.

"Your new car is really nice and comfortable." (Hazeline)

After safely (?) negotiating her way out of the seminar, they were currently returning home in Sae-Jin's new car. Hazeline was busy touching here, there and everywhere of the car's interior and admiring it.

"...You think so?" (Sae-Jin)

"Yes. You made a good choice. Isn't this model from a famous brand?" (Hazeline)

He smiled without saying anything. Not only was the brand very famous, this particular model had such a low production volume, it was very hard to buy one... but he didn't feel the need to say this out aloud.

- Knight Jin Seh-Hahn has ascended to low Mid Tier...

When Hazeline's curious fingers touched the stereo, the news about Jin Seh Hahn leaked out, causing Kim Sae-Jin to quickly switch it off.

"We are hearing a lot of that guy's news nowadays." (Hazeline)

"Seems like it. By the way, there is something that makes me curious whenever I am with Miss Hazeline..." (Sae-Jin)

He glanced at the perfect side profile of her face and carefully changed the subject.

"Mm? What is it?" (Hazeline)

"Ah, the thing is..."

"But Mister Kim Sae-Jin, are you really in a position to be curious about other women? I thought you're no different from a married man now?" (Hazeline)

66 25

Hazeline replied while smiling. So Sae-Jin let out a fake cough and concentrated on driving instead.

As an aside, the matter of him living together with/dating Yu Sae-Jung was widely known by every member of the Guild by now. According to Yi Hye-Rin's testimony, Yu Sae-Jung said it herself in a 'slip of a tongue' type of incident.

"Hahat, I was just kidding. It's a joke. Well, in any case... I'm quite close to Sae-Jung, so I guess it's fine. What are you curious about? You can ask me anything. After all, Sae-Jin is my

benefactor and all." (Hazeline)

At those words, Sae-Jin glanced at her once more.

"Well, Miss Hazeline. You are... a Dark Elf, yes?" (Sae-Jin)

"Yes, that's correct." (Hazeline)

"But..." (Sae-Jin)

"...Ah." (Hazeline)

Before he could finish saying what was on his mind, she began nodding her head slowly as if she figured it out.

"My skin. You are curious about that, yes?" (Hazeline)

"....Yes."

There were three types of Elves out there – regular Elves, High Elves, and Dark Elves.

Here, the regular Elves referred to those beautiful beings known in the mass media for possessing flawless milky skin, gorgeous facial features, as well as smooth and supple limbs.

Next was the High Elves. Also sometimes referred to as 'Noble' Elves, they possessed rich and pure bloodlines and commanded admiration and respect from other Elves.

Finally, Dark Elves. Not only they preferred darker places, their skin tone was also darker than other Elves, so they were called Dark Elves.

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"Mmmm..." (Hazeline)
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Seeing Hazeline's creased brows as if this question was greatly troubling her, Sae-Jin ended up swallowing down his saliva. Maybe it was because of curiosity, the words You don't have to tell me if it's too troublesome circled around in his mouth before disappearing completely.

"...Do you wish to know?" (Hazeline)

"Oh, that... well." (Sae-Jin)

He deliberately hesitated. Hazeline deeply stared at him before a slight grin broke out on her lips.

"Since the Goblin Alchemist says he's curious... It's actually simple, really. I brewed a certain potion, you see." (Hazeline)

"Pardon?" (Sae-Jin)

"You know, a potion. A potion. A potion that whitens the skin. I almost died after drinking that thing but still, I ended up with this pale skin." (Hazeline)

Her words were difficult to understand, but on the flip side, he could accept some part of her explanation. After all, she didn't question him too much and believed him when he spewed out that nonsense about concocting a potion to grow taller and stuff back then.

"But why did you create a potion like that? Surely, Miss Hazeline would have been plenty beautiful with a darker skin tone..." (Hazeline)

"Mister Kim Sae-Jin, you seem curious about a lot of things today." (Hazeline)

Sae-Jin tried to inquire a little bit further but Hazeline cut him off with a smile. He stopped asking there after detecting a clear message of warning in the tone of her voice.

The topic of conversation then changed back to their daily lives; did he and Yu Sae-Jung move house, no they didn't; how much did they earn, that was a secret. As their chatting continued, before long they arrived in front of Hazeline's house. While inwardly praising its capability that matched its million dollar price tag, Sae-Jin parked the car.

"Take care." (Sae-Jin)

"I will. Thank you for your help again. Ah, right. You still remember that we are meeting again in two weeks time, yes? We need to negotiate with the overseas contact, the one suggested by you. Looks like we'll have to fly over to the USA." (Hazeline)

"...Huh?"

At this unexpected revelation, Sae-Jin went blank-faced as he tilted his head.

"What's the matter?" (Hazeline)

"You mean, I, I need to fly over there on a plane?"

"Of course. A proxy officially appointed by the Alchemist must be present during the talks – I thought I told you this already?" (Hazeline)

"But, that..."

Watching Sae-Jin breaking out in panic, a thick smile began to infuse on Hazeline's lips.

"Well, it shouldn't be a problem, yes? Mister Sae-Jin can afford a lot of time nowadays, too. Three days and two nights should be more than enough, I think." (Hazeline)

"But you know of my..." (Sae-Jin)

"Yes, I remember. But I know Mister Sae-Jin's secrets already, so it's fine. I'll personally call and tell Sae-Jung after I finish up work tomorrow." (Hazeline)

*

Ttak!

Yu Sae-Jung angrily slammed the spoon down on the table. There were many emotions showing up on her face; anger, dismay, fear, worries, etc, etc.

"But do you think that even makes sense?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

Her voice was as cold as permafrost.

"...But it's work, though." (Sae-Jin)

"Even then!! No wait. If that's the case, then I'll go with you!"

(Yu Sae-Jung)

"I wish that's possible, but right now, you got your mobilisation orders, don't you?" (Sae-Jin)

Not only the Dawn Knights Order, but everyone else except Eden, received the mobilisation orders because of the ongoing Monster incidents; not only were they tasked with eradicating the Monsters, but they had to go out on patrol and currently, Knights couldn't even sleep for more than three hours a day as a result.

"Ah, ah... But why? Does Oppa have to go? Is it a problem for Unni to go alone?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"That's how important this deal is. Besides, I'll be accompanied by Mister Sun-Ho and a few other Mercenaries, so you don't have to worry about me." (Sae-Jin)

"...Dang it." (Yu Sae-Jung)

To think the son of Kim Yu-Sohn, Kim Sun-Ho was going too... She carried a big pout while roughly fidgeting around with the poor spoon. She had lots of things she'd like to say. Really lots. But she couldn't voice any of them in fear of being seen as a narrow-minded woman.

"Hmm..." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin quietly looked at her for a while, before reaching out and smoothly held her hand.

"I'll be back soon. In fact, I'll hurry it up. Since I'll end up missing you way too much, you know." (Sae-Jin)

He spoke with a smooth baritone voice while a gentle smile hung on his lips.

Yu Sae-Jung met his eyes and then, let out a long sigh. It was a fact that the person who loved more would feel more anxiety as well. And she had already decided to persevere through it all anyways.

- "...You'll call everyday?" (Yu Sae-Jung)
- "Of course."
- "...Always with slick answers... I wonder if a flying Monster will show up or something." (Yu Sae-Jung)

*

A late evening, the day before Sae-Jin's departure.

He had to make his way towards the Mercenary Company offices after Kim Yu-Sohn urgently called for him. And before Sae-Jin could say words of concern regarding the veteran Mercernary's pale complexion, Kim Yu-Sohn hurriedly brought up the reason for this unplanned meeting.

"I had another dream, sir. However, in this one... I believe that we need to alert the world right away." (Kim Yu-Sohn)

"...Excuse me?" (Sae-Jin)

"The future world I saw in my dream was not prepared at all, sir. It was no different from a living hell. That is why, we need to raise the alertness of the world at a bare minimum." (Kim Yu-Sohn)

Sae-Jin became flustered slightly by the sight of Kim Yu-Sohn who was seemingly a lot more urgent compared to when they conversed over the magic communication crystal.

"Ah... That... There are a lot of questions I'd like to ask, but first, will anyone believe it even if it's us saying it?" (Sae-Jin)

It was a reasonable question. When one tried to predict the advent of a huge event, there was a danger of being branded as a crazy man suffering from delusions, or be seen as a conspiracy theorist instead. Even if one used the excuse of a Trait, the result might end up the same.

"Of course, no one would listen seriously at the words of either me or you, the Guild Master. However, don't we have a certain trump card that can make everyone within South Korea trust in our words?" (Kim Yu-Sohn)

Even Kim Sae-Jin understood right away.

The Mercenary Lycan.

"We should send a letter with the Lycan's signature to the SID, and then hold a press conference." (Kim Yu-Sohn)

"Still, even if they believe us, wouldn't the confusion within the populace be too great? I mean, since the current situation of the Monster incidents are serious, we'll have to come to a compromise with the government, too..." (Sae-Jin)

This could bring about mass hysteria in the form of panic-buying of supplies, armed robbery and other survival instincts of humans commonly seen during the time of conflict, or even during the quasi-state of war.

"That is just the tip of the iceberg, sir." (Kim Yu-Sohn)

Within the energy-less eyes of Kim Yu-Sohn, impatience could be spied.

Seeing such urgency from him was a first; Kim Sae-Jin could only nod his head in silence while looking at him.

Even then, Kim Yu-Sohn showed no signs of standing up from his seat, so Sae-Jin pulled out his phone and called Jo Hahn-Sung.

- "Hello, Master. It's Jo Hahn-Sung here."

Although he was being treated as the real authority of the Guild and received hundreds of "requests" a day, as usual, Jo Hahn-Sung maintained humility when talking to Sae-Jin.

"I'm not sure when it'll happen, but... No, in two months' time, the Lycan is going to announce something big, so please have a chat with the relevant government officials. And prepare accordingly as well." (Sae-Jin)

- "I beg your pardon?"

Jo Hahn-Sung wielded considerable power and had become a person who wouldn't even bat an eyelid when hearing the names of politicians and Chaebols, but then, the weight that name carried still seemed quite considerable.

- "But how..."

"Please don't ask any more than this. And...... right, there is something else. Those idiots from MBS network. When we are holding the press conference, don't invite them." (Sae-Jin)

As an aside, MBS was a trashy media outlet that always tried to pick a fault with the activities of Sae-Jin and The Monster Guild. Although this might be seen as a cheap trick, it couldn't be helped as those bastards weren't the type of people who'd listen when spoken to nicely.

- "I already told them we won't give them any more information whatsoever in the future unless their president comes over here and apologises personally." (Jo Hahn-Sung)
 - "... As expected, you took care of that really well." (Sae-Jin)
- "Thank you very much, sir. As for preparations... firstly, for the venue, which place should we choose, sir?"

Selecting a correct place to hold a press conference was important. Rather than holding it within the grounds of the Guild or the main hall of the Monster Mercenary Company...

"Can we get permission from the Dawn Order?" (Sae-Jin)

Lately, Yu Sae-Jung had been saying this as if she was throwing it out there – that he was neglecting the Dawn and was getting too friendly with the Raven instead. If she was saying this much, then her father and grandfather must've had displayed their dissatisfaction since from a while ago.

- "Yes, sir. It shouldn't be an issue. In fact, I believe they might welcome us."

With this conference being held within the Dawn's premises, Sae-Jin would be able to show to the rest of the country that their relationship was still tight as ever.

"Then, let's go with that." (Sae-Jin)

When Kim Sae-Jin decided and ended the call, Kim Yu-Sohn let out a relieved sigh with an equally relieved expression.

< 30. The Right Start (2) > Fin

Chapter 102: The Right Start (3)

It was an early Summer morning, but the temperature was already very high. Hazeline was waiting for Kim Sae-Jin's arrival in the Incheon International Airport.

"...Hey, isn't she an Elf?" (A passerby 1)

"Look at her pale skin. I think you might be right." (A passerby 2)

"Should we go and ask her?" (A passerby 1)

It was fine for her to wait, since she was the one who showed up earlier than scheduled, but still, Hazeline found it hard to endure those pointed stares of curiosity and envy thrown at her way thanks to the thick robe she happened to wear at the moment. Hell, one or two thoughtless morons lowered their line of sight and tried to take a peek at her face without holding back, even.... Just like now, with these two buffoons.

Hazeline wanted so bad to shower these clueless idiots and their ugly mugs with a deadly magic spell, but held herself back by relying on some superhuman endurance.

"...My temper has gone softer by a lot, huh." (Hazeline)

If it was in the past, she'd have caused an incident by now. While feeling amazed by her own mellowing personality, Hazeline pulled out her phone.

– I'll be arriving there shortly. I meant to arrive there earlier, but several Paparazzi got stuck on me.

She was about to call Sae-Jin to find out where he was, only to see a text message from him sitting unopened in her phone. Hazeline typed a reply No need to rush without thinking too much and sent it, then began browsing the web.

To appease her boredom, she began messing around various portal sites, and before long, curiosity overtook her so she typed

the words 'Kim Sae-Jin' in the search engine.

- Kim Sae-Jin.

188 CM.

One of the most-talked about persons.

The profile pic shown was of a rather cool-looking man; and the information about him popping up on the search results were good enough to slap the faces of most middle-of-the-road celebrities. There were lots of photos of him walking by the pavement, totally unaware; stories of his daily activities; and his act of kindness that no one knew about until now... he even donated close to \$1 million to the orphanage he grew up in.

"Miss Hazeline!!"

As she was deeply immersed in the depths of Internet, she heard a voice calling out from somewhere and so, she slightly lifted her head to look.

"Ah, my apologies. The thing is... those Paparazzi." (Sae-Jin)

A tall, leggy man wearing a pair of sunglasses was walking straight towards her direction.

Although he only wore a simple white T-shirt and a pair of blue jeans, his tall height and the perfect body shape brought those clothes to life, while his voice that sounded sexy no matter where it was heard caused all the attention to focus on him.

Hazeline dazedly stared at the deep smile drawn on the lips visible below the sunglasses, the kind that celebrities liked to wear, before waking up suddenly and glared at the man in a somewhat unhappy manner.

"It's fine. I only waited for twenty minutes, after all." (Hazeline)

The promised time was ten o'clock, but now, it was twenty past ten. Kim Sae-Jin could only scratch the back of his neck.

"I'm truly sorry. We got held up trying to deal with the

paparazzi." (Kim Sun-Ho)

From behind Sae-Jin, Kim Sun-Ho emerged and began apologising in his stead.

"...I said, it's fine. Let's hurry and get going." (Hazeline)

Feeling awkward now, Hazeline quickly turned around and pulled her carry-on bag, heading towards the boarding gate.

*

The airplane that used Mana Stones as a fuel source only needed one hour to land on the city of San Francisco's International Airport. Although the trip took only one hour, thanks to time zone differences, currently it was eight in the evening in California. Still...

[Time left before needing to change: 14:45:94]

Since his Trait operated on the internal clock instead, he had quite a bit of free time. However...

- Over there!!

SFX for countless number of camera flashes going off

The crazy explosions of camera lights and the questions from the crowd of reporters went off as soon as Sae-Jin's traveling party left the airport's gates, and they were more than enough to make him and his group dizzy for a brief moment.

"What the?!" (Sae-Jin)

"Wha, wha, what..." (Hazeline)

Compared to how Hazeline reacted, one could say Sae-Jin was much more cool-headed. Seeing the throng of welcoming (?) crowd filling up the airport, her legs continued to shake uncontrollably before she dived behind Sae-Jin and hid there.

"Mister Sae-Jin!! D, d, do something!! I, I, I can't, handle, th, this, you know...!!!" (Hazeline)

"Guild Master Sae-Jin!! Please look this way!! This way!" (Unnamed reporter)

"For this potion export deal, the current Vice President Skendahl of the USA made an unprecedented move and sent the words of his appreciation to the Korean government and has expressed his anticipation. What are your thoughts on..." (Unnamed reporter 2)

Hazeline looked like she might throw up at any moment now, yet these reporters, speaking in Korean somehow, continued with their 'rush'. Kim Sae-Jin helped her stand before she collapsed and signaled Kim Sun-Ho with his eyes.

"Please do not worry." (Kim Sun-Ho)

As soon as the message was received, Sun-Ho and the subordinate Mercenaries bravely stepped forward and created the exit route. As expected of former Knights, they were worth every penny, and both Sae-Jin and Hazeline faced no further troubles as they left the airport.

*

After that chaos, the traveling party could just barely arrive at the luxury hotel located downtown in Los Angeles. Called 'Promance', almost all the floors from the ground all the way up to the penthouse suite, were booked out. And that penthouse suite occupied the entire top floor.

"For now... looks like we'll have to form a contract with both 'Rockemend Potions' and 'Tryth Potions', or at least with one of them. They are the biggest suppliers this side, after all." (Hazeline)

Right now, Hazeline and Kim Sae-Jin were holding a business meeting on the penthouse suite.

"They are both corporations, though?" (Sae-Jin)

"But of course. The way things operate can't be the same between Korea and the States, you know." (Hazeline) The situation of the Alchemy world in the States was rather different compared to that of South Korea.

Within the border of the comparably tiny South Korea, the small to medium Alchemy Houses took over the duty of potion supply. But in the far, far bigger US of A, two or three big corporations held exclusive rights to distribute potions in a given State. And since the political and financial muscles of these corporations were indeed powerful, the Alchemists here couldn't maintain their anonymity as much as their counterparts in South Korea.

Put simply, although this set-up was better for the wider market as a whole, it was actually more disadvantageous towards the suppliers – the Alchemists themselves. (TL: Just so you know, I do not agree with this author on this point. This set up seems far better for individual Alchemists if you ask me. But I'm not the one writing this novel, just a measly TLer, so...)

"All the proposed terms sound good so far. Minus the distribution fees, 85% of profits will be handed over to us." (Hazeline)

But Kim Sae-Jin's Guild was seemingly a 'special' exception to this rule.

The truth was, though, it wasn't just Kim Sae-Jin only; the federal government had initiated a new policy of 'looking after' their own Alchemists quite recently. And that was due to the potion drought, obviously.

A steady, near-unchanging peace had been maintained throughout the world for a long time, and that led to the lessening of the dangers inherent in Monster hunts. That, in turn, led to a decline in the demand and supply of potions. But now, with the sudden explosion of chaos caused by Monsters happening all over the globe, the demand had gone through the roof literally overnight...

But only the South Korea was able to escape this flow of events

happening in the world, as its potion supply had been quite healthy for a while thanks to a certain 'genius' Alchemist's efforts – the Goblin.

"...Well, in that case... Let's meet them first and then decide." (Sae-Jin)

If it was any other businessman, he would have to carefully assess the terms offered and the people offering them, but fortunately, Sae-Jin possessed a certain trump card that allowed him to decipher the true intentions of any person he met.

Of course, no truly successful businessmen worth their salt would be completely 'innocent', as it were. But still, it would be a big help if he could pick the lesser of the evils available out there.

"Yes, let's do that. For now, it's getting late already, so get some rest for tomorrow." (Hazeline)

Hazeline unhurriedly gathered the scattered documents and then got up, heading towards the adjoining room to the right side.

As an aside, thanks to Kim Sae-Jin's Trait, it was decided that the penthouse suite would be shared between him, Kim Sun-Ho and Hazeline – but it was Hazeline who ended up with the best room there.

"Then, let's end here for today." (Sae-Jin)

As soon as Kim Sun-Ho nodded his head, Sae-Jin changed into a wolf.

However, even at this sudden transformation, Sun-Ho's expression didn't change.

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The following day.

Kim Sae-Jin and Hazeline went and met the representatives from the two aforementioned corporations in turn. Both of them offered the very best terms they could afford, in order to not miss out on this chance to break through the current potion drought; and disregarding a few minor details meant to keep in check the rival influences, both contracts seemed quite profitable for Kim Sae-Jin.

Also, after the two meetings concluded, these corporations even did something wholly unnecessary and roped in a high-ranking government official from the current federal administration to stop by at the hotel and greet Sae-Jin and company, asking if there was anything he could do.

"We've already concluded talks with the Korean government. With this deal in place, the partnership between the Korean government and our side will strengthen even further." (Unnamed government official)

"..Is that so?" (Sae-Jin)

In all honesty, Sae-Jin found it a bit burdensome by the fact that a measly little potion export deal could change the future direction of a country, but the official, the Vice Minister from the Monster Affairs Ministry, continuously emphasized this point in order to inflate the importance of this deal.

"Of course. After all, you have chosen the United States of America ahead of everyone else – soon, I believe Mister President will hold a press conference and directly announce the deal to the public." (Unnamed government official)

"Keum. Right, by the way, I see that your Korean is really fluent." (Sae-Jin)

But, feeling his face getting hotter, Sae-Jin just had to change the topic. Honestly, it was rather mystifying to see a well-dressed white man speak so fluently in Korean.

"It's only a par for the course. Because of the current outbreak of all these Monster-related incidents across the world, the core interest of us at the Monster Affairs Ministry is centered around on Alchemy and weapons. Whether it's Alchemy or weapons – especially in Alchemy – there are a lot of disadvantages if one does not understand Korean." (Unnamed government official)

"...That's how it is?" (Sae-Jin)

This was probably because the website called Alchemy Page that Sae-Jin and Hazeline had co-founded, as well as various recipes and thesis written about ingredients they had began revealing publically since a while ago.

"Yes. By relying on others to translate and explain the new information appearing in real time on Alchemy Page, isn't it the same thing as voluntarily falling behind everyone else?" (Unnamed official)

On Alchemy Page, an 'Alchemist-exclusive space provided by The Monster', the Goblin Alchemist had revealed accurate information on medicinal ingredients that not many knew about, as well as recipes for painlessly concocting low to mid grade potions. Higher grade potion recipes were withheld, though, since they were trade secrets, after all.

Thanks to this, the internet-loving Alchemists migrated en masse away from the Alchemy Cafe website and found a new home in The Monster's Alchemy Page. Unlike the Alchemy Cafe which was full of gossip and back talk, the new site was filled with academic discussions regarding the art and science behind Alchemy, thus drawing in and educating many Alchemists in the process.

And now, just like what this government official was saying, many Alchemists were utilising this website not to fall behind the others. And the site had soon evolved into a world-famous academic forum where many visitors were learning the Korean language in order to make a better use of the valuable info available there.

As an aside, for some weird reason, Hazeline hated the Alchemy Cafe, so whenever she took a look at its near-instant decline into oblivion, compared to her own Alchemy Page that was growing in popularity every day, she had this content grin etched on her face.

"In that case, have you decided on the contract yet?" (Unnamed government official)

"We are still deliberating on the matter." (Hazeline)

Hazeline replied in his stead.

"By the way, both of them were trying to play some kind of trivial tricks with us, you see." (Hazeline)

""

Seeing the official's expression darken, Sae-Jin added his words right away.

"But since we came all the way to the States, we do plan to make this contract happen." (Sae-Jin)

"Ah, ahahaha. That's a relief to hear." (Unnamed government official)

Sae-Jin also broke out in a short laughter after witnessing the colour return to the official's face.

"Ah, that's right. If they try any other strange tricks, please do not hesitate and give me a call. Here's my card." (unnamed government official)

Seeing this earnest attitude of caring about Sae-Jin more than his own country's corporations...

"Of course. We'll give you a call." (Sae-Jin)

...Sae-Jin didn't refuse the man and received the card.

And so, all the meetings concluded by 9 in the evening.

Kim Sae-Jin, Hazeline, Kim Sun-Ho as well as other Mercenaries returned to their quarters, thinking that they might get to enjoy the remainder of their stay in this ultra-upmarket hotel as a paid-for holiday.

AM 00:00 - midnight.

Kim Sae-Jin's eyes snapped open in the middle of the night.

There was a nearly imperceptible tremor and the ominous aura. Even while feeling uncertain, his body must have sensed the approaching dangers, as his claws had extended out already.

He couldn't tell where this feelings of danger was originating from. But the instincts of the Wolf told him there was no time to spare.

He shot out from his own room and headed straight for Hazeline's.

"...Kkyaahck!!"

As soon as she was woken by the shape of a wolf bursting into her room as if breaking the door down, Hazeline screamed her lungs out.

"W, w, w, what do you think you're doing right now?!"

With one hand, she pulled the blanket tightly while the other hand was getting ready to fire a magic spell. Her voice shook as she asked.

"Get, get out of here, right now!! Kkyack!! M, Mister, Sun-Ho, and what are you doing here, too?"

Before Hazeline's screams could end, even Kim Sun-Ho was rushing into her room as well.

And at the same time...

Kkhoo-goo-goo-goong...

An unsettling vibration shook the entire hotel.

Instinctively, all three present turned their heads to left. They had sensed something looking at them.

[&]quot;"

^{66 22}

66 25

And there, beyond the wall made of thick plate glass, they saw a pair of terrifyingly huge red eyeballs staring at their direction.

On that grotesquely distorted face, the only things that seemed relatively normal were those two eyes.

It was a Doo-Urk-Shi-Nee. (TL: Well, this is a sub-type of the Dokkaebi. There is no Western equivalent that I can think of – just think of a Japanese Oni crossed with the Attack on Titan's giants. And you're halfway there.)

"...F*ck!!"

They moved really fast. Changing back to the Human form, Sae-Jin quickly embraced Hazeline and began running to the opposite direction from the huge Monster.

"Cast the magic barrier, now!!" (Sae-Jin)

And then, while shouting at Hazeline held tight in his arms, Sae-Jin ran to the right and broke through another thick plate glass, descending hundreds of metres down to the ground.

< 30. The Right Start (3) > Fin.

Chapter 103: The Right Start (4)

Although he fell from the top floor of the hotel located high up, it only took briefest of moments for his airborne feet to touch the solid ground.

Kwaahang!!!

The ground where Kim Sae-Jin landed on caved in to a deep crater, and a powerful shock wave spread around to the surroundings.

"Are you unhurt?" (Sae-Jin)

He looked at Hazeline who had tightly wrapped her arms around his neck. Fortunately, she seemed to have activated the barrier in time, and wasn't negatively affected by the abrupt descent.

"Yeah. I'm fine thanks to you. However..." (Hazeline)

Indeed, there was a far more pressing matter to focus at that moment. On the road they had just landed on quite noisily, countless small and large Doo-Urk-Shi-Nees were there waiting, as if to surround the duo.

"First time seeing one with my own eyes." (Sae-Jin)

"Me too." (Hazeline)

The 'Doo-Urk-Shi-Nee'. A creature of 'emptiness' that made nary a sound nor possessed substance; a creature that could only be seen by the naked eye and by nothing else.

Their individual sizes may have differed from one to the other, but without fail, all of them were glaring at Kim Sae-Jin and Hazeline's direction with those creepy red eyes. At this rather unsettling sight, Hazeline hugged Sae-Jin tighter without realising it.

"...Keum."

At this unexpected skinship, Sae-Jin even forgot how severe the

current situation was and ended up getting tensed up somewhat. But then...

Kkhoong!

"Are you two alright?" (Kim Sun-Ho)

Belatedly, Mercenaries led by Kim Sun-Ho descended and landed on the ground as well.

Almost at the same time, the gigantic Doo-Urk-Shi-Nee swung its equally huge arm and slammed into the hotel Kim Sae-Jin and company were staying just now.

Khuooong!!!

A huge explosion filled up the world, shaking the eerie stillness and ripping it apart; the streets, formerly bathed with pitch-black darkness became showered in bright lights at the same time.

As if that was the signal, all the small and large Doo-Urk-Shi-Nees occupying every inch of the road began their frenzied activity.

Kim Sae-Jin quickly put Hazeline down on the ground and swung his fist towards a Doo-Urk-Shi-Nee that was right in front of the rushing pack. Although its face was smashed to bits in one hit, a certain unpleasant sensation came washing all over his body from coming in contact with the uniquely-disgusting skin of a Doo-Urk-Shi-Nee as well as from its blackish-red blood.

"Yuck..."

While frowning deeply in disgust, Sae-Jin extracted Mana out of his body and then used the Orc's Smithing Technique.

Seuseuseuseu-

Mana slowly condensed as if to form a crystal, and soon enough, it took on the shape of a blue sword.

Since Sae-Jin's Proficiency Level for 'Mana Body' was still on the low, the sword's strength and overall hardness was somewhat imperfect, but as he had used Mana as the base ingredient, its sharpness would still be top notch.

Sshya-aack...

He struck out a sword aura and it bisected a Doo-Urk-Shi-Nee cleanly in half.

Unfortunately, this created-from-Mana weapon he wielded couldn't last long. When he cut five or six Monsters down, the sword dissipated away like a cloud of dust. Whenever that happened, though, Sae-Jin created a weapon that could last a bit longer than before and continued to slay countless Doo-Urk-Shi-Nees.

The afterimage left behind in the wake of a sword swing was then pierced straight through by a lengthy spear, and the smooth sword aura drawn from a longsword undulated like a snake, effortlessly slicing apart limbs and bodies of the Monsters coming in contact with it.

A longsword, a podao, a long sabre, a rapier, a main-gauche, a claymore, a spear, etc, etc... All these disparate weapon types found themselves in the hands of a weapons expert and were utilised like true treasures.

"But how..." (Hazeline)

Hazeline dazedly stared at Sae-Jin's battle as he fought relying solely on his senses while swapping his weapons out every ten seconds, before she finally woke up and began reciting the chants for a magic spell.

Her target was the gigantic Doo-Urk-Shi-Nee that was currently searching for a certain someone without making a single noise.

*

Although a totally unexpected hell had broken out, Kim Sae-Jin and his party could safely survive the ensuing chaos. That was because, in less than five minutes, a state-wide mobilization order had been issued by the Californian State Governor.

Exactly 15 minutes after the hotel collapsed, army tanks and seemingly thousands of Knights and Hunters poured in, completely sweeping away every single Doo-Urk-Shi-Nees present.

After the incident came to an end, that same Vice Minister from earlier arrived in haste, and began explaining the reason for this unprecedented swiftness of the response – that it was because the US government didn't want to see the export deal going down the proverbial drain. He even made a desperate face as he implored Sae-Jin to not think too badly of them because of this incident.

"...Whoo-ah." (Sae-Jin)

And so, Sae-Jin and his group could catch their breath while being protected by the Knights. After hearing the rumours about them, all the Knights present here were deeply fearful of this potion deal going down the drain, so they were constantly worrying about Sae-Jin and company being 'comfortable' and stuff.

"I was panicking then... what a relief that Mister Sae-Jin was there. Also, for the first time in my life, I'm now a top VIP, too... I'm more used to being chased around, you know." (Hazeline)

There was no energy in Hazeline's voice.

"Are you hurt anywhere?" (Sae-Jin)

"Maybe because I've exhausted my Mana... I'm kinda feeling dizzy and sleepy." (Hazeline)

She spoke up to here and slowly leaned her head against Sae-Jin's shoulder. Of course, her fragrant scent drifted into his nose and lightly tickled the senses. Most other women would get really alarmed and call Hazeline's actions crafty like a fox, but as a guy, Sae-Jin simply couldn't push her away – so, all he could do was to let out a fake cough just once.

"Keum... Is that so?" (Sae-Jin)

"Yeah. By the way, Mister Sae-Jin? You were somewhat cool back

there. Since when did you become so proficient in handling weapons like that?" (Hazeline)

Recalling once more the sight of the overwhelming martial prowess he displayed, Hazeline asked, her face glowing warmly. Molding Mana into various weapons such as swords, greatswords, spears – anyone would be deeply impressed by the coolness of him defeating all his enemies regardless of what the weapon was in his hand.

"Hahaha..."

Kim Sae-Jin simply broke out in laughter. Hazeline looked at him as if she found his demeanor rather interesting, but then, her expressions hardened.

"However... just who summoned all those Doo-Urk-Shi-Nees here?" (Hazeline)

A Doo-Urk-Shi-Nee was not a normal type of a Monster. Special existences found in the gap between 'the Rift' and 'the material world', they could only be called forth with a summoning ceremony or a witchcraft of some kind, and more importantly, they would follow the command of the one who summoned them to the letter.

In other words, to see a swarm of Doo-Urk-Shi-Nees suddenly attack the hotel Sae-Jin was staying in, there was really no need to ponder too deeply what their purpose was.

""

Sae-Jin could think of 'someone' who might be behind this incident. However, he didn't feel like saying the truth out aloud right now.

"Don't worry about such things and just get a good rest."

He gritted his teeth and hardened his expression as well. Hazeline gazed at him for a bit longer, and then, lowered her head back down against his shoulder. While closing her eyes, she was

thinking, His shoulders are so broad...

*

The following day.

Leaving the responsibility of finding out the culprits behind the mass summoning of Doo-Urk-Shi-Nees to the American government, Sae-Jin and Hazeline hurried with concluding the deal.

Since they had already received advice from Jo Hahn-Sung, they were able to get the ball rolling faster than expected. Sae-Jin then signed the contract with both corporations at the same time, the distribution of potions in the west of the USA now being handled by them.

To minimise the risk of getting ambushed once more, as soon as the deal was signed, Sae-Jin and his group rushed back to South Korea. And now, he was driving Hazeline back home towards the Gangwon Province.

"My first impression of Mister Sae-Jin was... only about so-so." (Hazeline)

"...Just so-so?!" (Sae-Jin)

"Yep. You know this too, don't you? That Elves have high standards. It's the same story for Dark Elves, too." (Hazeline)

Kim Sae-Jin and Hazeline – she was perhaps one person Sae-Jin had known the longest. While driving, they chatted about this and that in a friendly atmosphere, as for the past two years there was unexpectedly a lot of memories they had shared.

The day they first met; when Sae-Jin revealed his identity to her; when she mistook him as the inheritor of Rodes's legacy; when those Vampires suddenly ambushed them, etc, etc...

"Ah, that's right. Mister Sae-Jin, you said you were curious, right? The reason for my skin being this colour." (Hazeline)

"...Mm? Oh, I was curious back then, but if it's not a comfortable subject, you don't have to say anything." (Sae-Jin)

At her sudden change of topic, Sae-Jin took a quick glance towards the passenger seat, but when their eyes met, he quickly averted his gaze.

"Even still. I felt that it's unfair to you, somehow. I mean, you've told me everything about your secrets, yet... Honestly, we even went through two life-or-death situations together. But more importantly, I wish to tell you the truth." (Hazeline)

"...Ha, haha... Umm, really?"

As an aside, he still hadn't told her the true reason behind the Vampires ambushing them. Still unaware of the truth, she carried a gentle smile on her lips as she slowly continued with her words.

"Well, there is this old saying. That Elves are pure and noble and so, can only fall in love with one person... Many humans think it's nothing but a lie, but actually, it's real."

For Elves, the meaning of 'love' was incomparably deep. Whether it was Dark Elves, High Elves, or regular Elves, it was the same.

"But did you know that saying has been romantically repackaged a great deal? The reality is very different." (Hazeline)

"Different?" (Sae-Jin)

"Yes. For an Elf, 'love' is the same thing as obsession and persistence all rolled into one. Doesn't matter what the situations and the conditions of the target of love are like, if an Elf falls in love, then that Elf will not hesitate doing everything in order be loved back. The reality of the species, who are known to possess the perfect appearance and mindset, is that we're simply the collection of imperfections." (Hazeline)

As she spoke, her voice contained a certain feeling of utter, desolate emptiness.

"And so, I... used to love someone. And that person liked women with lighter skin, so I lightened my own. And when I learned that he liked another woman who was gentle and loyal, I even dropped everything I was doing as a Wizard." (Hazeline)

Panicking at her sudden, impromptu confession of the past, Sae-Jin slowed the car's speed slightly. Meanwhile, Hazeline grandly sighed out and continued.

"However, that person didn't love me back. Until the end, he only had that woman in his mind, and then, died trying to protect that very woman. Back then, I've never felt sadness stronger than that before. If I didn't blame someone, I thought I might end up killing myself. So... I did something really deplorable." (Hazeline)

Kim Sae-Jin quietly observed her.

"That is why... Mister Sae-Jin, you should be wary of Elves. You shouldn't treat us too nicely, and you must keep a safe distance away from us. Elves just don't have the strength to distance themselves from a person they find interesting. Of course, there is a big gap between 'interest' and 'love', but still." (Hazeline)

The moment her words ended, the car came to a stop. They were in front of her house. As if she found her confession embarrassing, she lightly slapped her cheeks and undid the seat belt buckle.

"Well then, I'll get going now~. Mister Sae-Jin, thank you for always~."

"Ah, hang on a sec." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin quickly stopped her just before she could rush out of the car. He carefully studied her darkened expression, and then extracted a smallish box from his pocket.

"Please take this with you. It's a present."

While roaming around the city of Los Angeles, there was this one thing that seemed to have drawn her interest. As she was busy with meetings and thus unable to personally buy it, Sae-Jin had bought it behind her back after he caught her gaze with his acute intuition of the Wolf.

"This is..." (Hazeline)

She dazedly looked at the gift in her hand.

"Well, isn't that the thing that makes sound when you open it? I thought you were interested in it." (Sae-Jin)

The 'thing' she was looking at with complicated emotions two days ago – a music box.

"Ah..."

"I should get going. Take care of yourself." (Sae-Jin)

Leaving behind those words, Sae-Jin drove off.

"Honestly. Didn't he hear my advice..." (Hazeline)

Watching the car moving further away, Hazeline muttered without much strength.

*

The exporting potions not only helped to increase the fame of Kim Sae-Jin and his Guild, it also had the effect of two countries solidifying their relationship. The US President held a conference to personally announce the deal, and Kim Sae-Jin had been invited to the Blue House, even...

Whatever the case may have been, when he returned home, he also returned to his daily routine. Sometimes as Jin Seh-Hahn, sometimes as Kim Sae-Jin, sometimes as a Monster.

In the meantime, Jin Seh-Hahn's rank had increased to Mid Tier after only two months of activity as the 'Special Employee from Eden', and it seemed that he could hit his goal of upper Mid Tier before the end of that self-imposed six months deadline.

However, as the time continuously flowed forward, the ominous atmosphere for the world became worse and worse.

The frequency of Monster incidents soared higher and higher, and hundreds of people lost their lives every day. Although the loss wasn't as serious in South Korea where the foundation of potion and weapons supply was well established, in places such as Africa, South America, Southeast Asia, etc, etc... The situation had deteriorated so bad in several Third World nations that there was no more point in governance anymore.

"I got called into action eight times in one single day, even... it was really difficult, you know?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

And now – a morning in the middle of September, the time when Summer was slowly coming to its inevitable end. Kim Sae-Jin yawned inwardly as he listened to Yu Sae-Jung's complaints.

"If that's the case, take today and tomorrow off." (Sae-Jin)

"It's not as simple as that... Dad won't give me a time off." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"I'll speak to him." (Sae-Jin)

"Really? That might work~." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Kim Sae-Jin's influence had become such that he could let one Knight miss the mobilization order without too much trouble. Yu Sae-Jung energetically dived into his arms.

Ttiriinng-

Suddenly, the mobile phone went off. Both Yu Sae-Jung and Kim Sae-Jin's eyes focused on its direction. He moved slightly faster than her, reaching out and snatching the phone away.

"Who is it?" Asked Yu Sae-Jung.

"Oh, it's nothing." (Sae-Jin)

Making a half-hearted excuse, he sent his reply, and then placed the phone down.

On the LCD of the phone facing downwards...

The name 'Hazeline' was showing on it.

< 30. The Right Start (4) > Fin.

Chapter 104: All Tangled Up (1)

Dark Elves hated light. No one knew the exact reason why; everyone simply accepted it as a fact, and in all honesty, the reality was also like that as well. So, most of the homes belonging to Dark Elves were painted in achromatic colours or in black/grey. Heck, quite a few of those houses didn't have any lighting fixtures, even.

""

Inside a dark room truly fitting for a Dark Elf, Hazeline was lying on the bed, gazing deeply into the boxy LCD screen exuding a lone light that brightened this forlorn space.

The contents on the screen that drew her interest was thus:

Kim Sae-Jin (Verified Account)

@SJKIM

Guild Master, The Monster/The Orc Blacksmith/High Tier Hunter

Followers 45,345,874 Currently Following 10

Probably the most famous person among the younger generation, Kim Sae-Jin. The number of followers were well over 45 million, highest in Asia. In other words, as many as half the population of the entire Korean nation. No wonder, what with this much interest shown by the general public, every once in a while photos and posts uploaded to his social media profile would become topics of news.

"...Why are there so many pics of him with women in here?"

Hazeline pouted visibly as she carefully studied each and every photo appearing on his profile. There were a ton of selfies uploaded to it, but almost half of them were taken with different women.

Of course, the frequency of those pics being uploaded drastically decreased ever since he began dating Yu Sae-Jung, but still... There were literally endless posts and reposts made by several women who were shamelessly wagging their tails. And many of these ladies had social status that even made Hazeline seem a bit plain in comparison.

Hey, wait a minute. Even I, as an Elf, recognise that person?!

"...Ah-oo. I must be going crazy."

Hazeline finally woke up from her unnecessarily fevered participation of the social media movement, and flung away her phone to a corner of the bed.

Although she found herself pathetic and hopeless for doing this against a man who already had a girlfriend... but somehow, things had become like this lately.

Of course, she did think about that man every now and then. He was eloquent, was a gentleman and had good manners. Initially, her thoughts of him wasn't on the level of a deep, deep interest – but rather, something more common, something like He's a nice guy~, that kind of admiration.

However, as their interaction over the matters related with potions increased in frequency, the depths of her feelings began growing deeper as if she was getting seduced by his innate scent; the real decisive blow came in the forms of two unexpected battles and one heartfelt gift.

And so, nowadays, whenever she was left alone at home and feeling a bit sentimental, her head would be filled with Sae-Jin's face.

But this was definitely not love. For an Elf, the meaning of love was far more graver than dying itself, and so when an Elf fell in love, one couldn't carry on with his or her daily life anymore.

Hazeline knew that she was still very far from that. Very.

However, at the same time, she recognised her condition as a very bad omen as well. On top of that, the 'situation' was even worse than the last time. After all, he already had a lover...

"Fuu."

Hazeline let out a long sigh, her eyes instinctively moving back towards her phone.

It would have been nice if her feelings remained where she might think about him whenever she felt lonely... but such a thing was not possible for an Elf.

In the end, she blamed her complicated emotions as the result of her species-unique instincts, and picked the phone back up.

"...Just when is he going to send back a reply... Ah, maybe?"

There was no reply whatsoever until now for a text message she sent to him over two hours ago. But rather than getting annoyed, worries filled her up first.

"What, are, you, doing, now? You, still, haven't, replied, yet... Maybe, is, there, something, wrong..."

She read each word carefully before sending the message. She then slowly lowered the phone down and her gaze drifted towards the top of the desk. A charming little music box, shaped like a piano, was calling out for her attention.

...

She wordlessly approached the music box and touched it. Accompanying the gentle, soothing music note, a faint scent of a certain someone drifted along in the air.

*

The date was 9th of September, the opening day for the seminar held by the World Monster Organization, also known as WMO.

This time, it was being held in Seoul, South Korea. The biggest reason for this was due to the appearance and propagation of the Hero Orcs – or Korean Orcs, as they were referred to as, whose origins still remained a mystery.

"There are four ranks within the Hero Orcs: The Orc Warrior, the Orc Jaguar, the Orc Senior, and the Orc Chieftain." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin was attending this seminar. Since she was the only human being who could enter the village of the Hero Orcs, she was invited to speak as the sole authority on all things Hero Orc.

"Rather strangely, there is no rank of 'Great Warrior' with the Hero Orcs. That's largely due to them not having the hierarchybased division of ranks, although they do show admiration and respect towards the older generation." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Her role here was to convey the information on Hero Orcs to these professors and scholars who came from all across the globe.

"That is why, I propose using the term 'Senior' in lieu of 'Great Warrior' to denote that admiration and respect shown by the Orcs."

From everything she had observed so far, Hero Orcs possessed far greater intelligence and wisdom compared to regular Orcs. They were able to make a basic reasoning and even knew how to be considerate towards others as well.

All these interesting information definitely showed the difference between them and other types of Monsters, so all the scholars here zealously took memos while nodding their heads nonstop.

"How can you tell the ranks apart?" (Unnamed scholar)

A middle-aged white man asked in fluent Korean.

"That's a good question. Like other normal Orcs, you can tell fully grown adults apart from juveniles by their body sizes, and for the adults, you can use their epidermis as the yardstick. The bluer it is, higher the rank it has." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"In that case, can we still estimate one's age with its hair?" (Another unnamed scholar)

"Yes. There's no change to that fact." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"What is the current estimated size of the village?" (Yet another unnamed scholar)

"There are around 1000 individuals living there, and about half of that number are fully grown adults." (Kim Yu-Rin)

As expected from a bunch of scientists, the attendees continuously threw lots of questions laced with significant amount of curiosity. That resulted in Kim Yu-Rin's part in the seminar going on for one extra hour.

"Fuu... Then, shall we end it here? Thank you all for coming."

And finally.

Kim Yu-Rin quickly escaped the seminar hall while being showered with applause and headed to the car park; and as soon as she set off, she headed straight towards the Monster field.

"I'm gonna be so, so late."

Today was the scheduled day for the sparring with the Orc. There was a grin on her face without her even realising it.

*

"You've become stronger."

An afternoon with harsh sunlight pouring down.

While wiping away the streaming sweat, Kim Yu-Rin said to the Hero Orc.

Lately, all their sparring sessions ended in a draw. In the beginning, she won most of the encounters, but the Orc continued to grow stronger the wilder each sparring became. Of course, she

too grew stronger as well while sparring with 'him', so a disaster such as losing had been prevented so far.

66 25

Wordlessly, the Orc sat down and leaned against a huge tree trunk. Judging by how he was breathing angrily through his nose, one could tell that he was unhappy with the spar ending in yet another draw.

"Even this much is still quite amazing, really. Although I look like this, I'm the world's 50th strongest Knight, I'll have you know." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Her skills that were getting better by sparring with the Orc – she was able to achieve this career-high world-wide Knight ranking as a result. While advertising her own strength, Kim Yu-Rin sat down next to him.

""

She silently studied the Orc's mood. Thankfully, the Orc didn't show any signs of avoiding her.

"Thanks to you, I'm also getting stronger." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Speaking like so, Kim Yu-Rin carefully placed her head on his shoulder. When she took a quick glance, the Orc didn't even seem to think about her at all. She began enjoying the perfect combination of a gently blowing breeze and a wide, dependable shoulder.

"Oi."

Suddenly, the Orc opened his mouth. Kim Yu-Rin's body shook for a brief moment, wondering if she should take her head away... but then, decided play dumb.

"We stop doing this, from now." (Sae-Jin the Orc)

"...Excuse me?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

But then, what he said next made her unable to sit still, and so,

out of utter shock, she quickly detached her head from his shoulder. The Orc stared right at her and slowly continued on with his words.

"Don't come here anymore." (Sae-Jin the Orc)

Although the Orc's facial expression was cold and indifferent, Kim Sae-Jin actually was doing this for her sake.

'The hit list.'

Not too long ago, the Linked-up Vampire Apostle brought along a new piece of information.

Vampires had compiled a list of individuals who could get in the way of achieving their goals, and that kill list had entered the hands of the Vampire Lord.

Apparently, Kim Sae-Jin's name was rightfully occupying the top position on that list. Without a doubt, the recent episode with the Doo-Urk-Shi-Nees happened because of the list.

And Kim Yu-Rin occupied the second spot.

Unfortunately, it was too d**n easy to predict Yu-Rin's current routine. Meaning, it would be so much easier to ambush her. After all, she'd willingly show up at the Orc village all by herself twice a week.

"But, but why so suddenly?!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Her eyes were trembling hard. She looked utterly devastated, but the Orc remained cold.

"But, but? But why, for what..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"I'm bored of you." (Sae-Jin)

He was unable to say the kind of excuse she might have accepted easily, only warning her off without offering a proper explanation.

"This, the last time you enter. Next time you want to enter village, be ready to kill, or be killed. I already tell other Orcs." (Sae-

Jin the Orc)

"What! What the heck is that?! You should tell me the reason first, so I..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

She desperately ran up to him, unable to comprehend at all.

However, the Orc simply grasped the mace with his hand and swung it towards her.

"Ah-euck! Wait! Stop fighting and let's talk, talk...!!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

She backed off quickly enough, but she couldn't prevent her body from taking some damage from the sudden attack.

She didn't give up, though, and continued to demand explanation from him, but the Orc stuck to answering with violence. As the seconds ticked by, even the other Hero Orcs began casting hostile gazes towards her direction.

"You, you b****d!!"

And so, all she could say was this one curse word before beating a hasty retreat.

Kim Sae-Jin the Orc's eyes stayed with the departing back of her. The blood seeping out from the wounds he had inflicted on her fell like teardrops, leaving deep trails behind.

**

"Why are there so many applicants?" (Sae-Jin)

A call from Jo Hahn-Sung was waiting for the heavy-hearted Sae-Jin's arrival back home.

The subject of the discussion was the qualifications of the potential Griffin riders – to assess each Knight who wished to ride on the back of a Griffin.

- "It looks like almost every upper Mid Tier Knight in the country have applied so far. The view of Griffins being an effective

means of policing in the near future has already become widespread, sir. And also, what with the current state of affairs being as is... this and that point seems to have combined into one and so many people have applied as a result, sir."

As an aside, the number of Griffins managed by The Monster now was thirty, which prompted the establishment of the 'Griffin Rider Certification' law. Obviously, the people responsible for awarding the certificate was The Monster Guild.

"Did the Knight Orders give out their permissions? After all, the lease fee will be nothing to laugh about." (Sae-Jin)

And 'interested parties' related to The Monster Guild were suspecting that these Griffins would later become an important source of revenue. It of course had to do with the leasing fee; a callout lasting for half a day would normally require the Knights Orders to cough up somewhere north of \$100,000.

Although Sae-Jin did feel it was still on the side of being too cheap as riding on Griffins was rated as the number one in the most cost-efficient way of traveling by the Time magazine. But any higher than that, it wouldn't mesh well with the current market conditions.

- "Yes, they sure did, sir. And related to that topic, the Dawn Order requested for the purchasing of a Griffin if it's possible. They promised to give us a substantial amount if we do."

When Jo Hahn-Sung said those words, Yu Sae-Jung's ear perked up while she pretended to watch the TV on the side.

"Have they prepared a suitable nesting area and trained the staff accordingly?" (Sae-Jin)

Nod, nod.

Even before Jo Hahn-Sung could make his reply, Yu Sae-Jung was busy nodding her head. Kim Sae-Jin chuckled slightly after realising that her influence played a big part in this request being

made.

- "Yes, sir. They seemed to have benchmarked our nesting area and constructed theirs close to our own, so even Raul might be able to adapt easily."

By the way, Raul was the name of a female Griffin that Yu Sae-Jung really, really liked. (TL: Really, author? You and your bad naming sense...)

"In that case... Not sure about selling, but what about a ten-year lease? Tell them we'll go with that." (Sae-Jin)

As soon as those words left his mouth, Yu Sae-Jung silently punched the air in celebration and hugged his back tightly.

- "Yes, sir, I understand."
- "Alright, then. Please take care of the rest." (Sae-Jin)
- "Ah, that's right. The Foreign Affairs Minister has contacted us as well, sir. There seems to be a big backlog of countries requesting for export of potions and Griffins, starting from the nations of the EU block..."

"Mister Hahn-Sung, I'm leaving the matter of meeting them to your discretion."

- "Sir?!"

Jo Hahn-Sung dazedly spat out a single word reply. Chuckling to himself, Sae-Jin was about to end the call, only to hear the urgent voice from the other side telling him not to.

"Is there something else?" (Sae-Jin)

- "Yes sir, there is one more thing. This is the important one."
- "...What is it?"

Jo Hahn-Sung took in a deep breath.

- "The date for the Lycan's press conference has been set."
- < 31. All Tangled Up (1) > Fin.

Chapter 105: All Tangled Up (2)

After receiving the general summary of the information ahead of time, the Korean government requested a delay of three months for the press conference, till late November, saying that they needed to make their own preparations. They also requested that, in order to minimise mass panic and confusion, the wording and the sentence structures should be softened up a bit.

- "It seems that Miss Yu Baek-Song and the members of the National Assembly who are friendly with the Dawn have given us a great deal of their considerations, sir. I heard that the administration was going to announce the findings of the Lycan as if they had uncovered it first." (Jo Hahn-Sung)

"Is that how it was? Anyhow... I understand. But what a relief this is. I thought they might simply choose to ignore us." (Sae-Jin)

Bureaucrats didn't like uncertainty and instability, almost every single one of them. That was the reason why one often saw The Government hurriedly trying to fix the mess only after the actual event had come and gone.

- "I think it's only possible due to the name value of the Lycan, the man who had correctly predicted the Red Moon, sir."
- "...I know, right? Well, Mister Hahn-Sung, I know you're busy, so let me not keep you from your work." (Sae-Jin)
 - "Yes, sir. Take care. Please give me a call if you need anything."

Sae-Jin ended the call there. Yu Sae-Jung waited by his side quietly until then, before carefully asking him.

"Seriously now, won't our country be destroyed at this rate?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"...It's not going to, so don't you worry." (Sae-Jin)

Kim Yu-Sohn said that he saw countless Boss-level Monsters and

many cities being decimated in his dreams. However, what he saw was not the past that had already happened. No, that was the undetermined future that could be changed at any time.

Since he was planning to expose everything, including the hit list compiled by the Vampires, there were literally a c**p ton of variables still left to play yet.

"Look, there are so many geniuses in our country as we speak. Including you, too – aren't you the youngest ever upper Mid Tier in history? It's quicker than Miss Yu-Rin by two years, right?" (Sae-Jin)

"...Three years." (Yu Sae-Jung)

She bashfully corrected him and then fell into his arms.

"The youngest in the world...Well, really. It's all thanks to Oppa." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Murmuring the words that were hard to tell whether she was boasting or praising Sae-Jin, Yu Sae-Jung rubbed her face against his chest.

"Ah, right! By the way, I really had no idea that Oppa could fight so well like that. I got really shocked, you know. Didn't know Oppa was on such a level..." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Suddenly, she began saying something he couldn't quite catch.

"What are you talking about out of the blue?" (Sae-Jin)

"Mm? You don't know?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

Yu Sae-Jung tilted her head, before pulling out her phone and then logged on to the official page of the Dawn Order.

"Here. Someone uploaded the CCTV footage when Oppa got ambushed by the Doo-Urk-Shi-Nees, and the whole thing's getting really hot right now, but... Hmm, maybe because the vid is circulating only within the Knights communities, is that why you didn't know?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"...Ah?!"

The story about Sae-Jin being under heavy assault in a foreign country was already a big news locally. It was to a point where the President of the USA had expressed his regret, even.

"Wait a minute. What is this..." (Sae-Jin)

He got somewhat concerned so he snatched Yu Sae-Jung's phone away.

Doo-Urk-Shi-Nees could only be seen with naked eyes so they didn't show up on the CCTV footage, but...

His concerns became reality. The Kim Sae-Jin shown on the screen was busy thrusting swords and spears and other types of weapons at empty air.

"Ah~, that. Even though it looks a bit weird without anyone else there, your movements alone looks really good, you know? Really nice. Plus, those weapons, you are using Mana to form those weapons, right? How did you do that? Every Knight in the country is seemingly dying of curiosity right now. Some are saying, isn't that like, exceeding the levels of regular sword aura and stuff?"

As if she too wanted to know, Yu Sae-Jung asked him, her eyes sparkling with genuine curiosity.

"No, uh, it's not what you think, it's... just my Trait." (Sae-Jin)

"...Is that so? Anyhow, everyone on the Dawn's forum are praising it nonstop. There are even talks of asking you to take the Knight exam, since it's d**n shame to waste your talent away." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Keum. R, really?"

He couldn't tell whether that was only her opinion or not, but now that he heard this much praise, the footage felt a bit different to him somehow. The sight of him rapidly slashing the empty air with the Mana sword was... "In that case, should we spar for a while?" (Sae-Jin)

...It was more than enough to make his shoulders straighten up.

But Yu Sae-Jung lightly shook her head and then said...

"No, well, I... want to do the 'other' type of sparring instead of that one."

Her face flushing deep red, she pushed her face towards his lips.

SFX for door bells ringing

Unfortunately, the 'other' type of sparring that was all ready to begin got blocked by the sudden intrusion of the door bells, causing Yu Sae-Jung to frown very deeply. She then grumpily stomped towards the front door and then shouted in dissatisfaction.

"Who is it?!"

That was her anger-ridden loud shout that not one person had heard of until now.

- "What the... Uh... It, it's Kim Yu-Rin. Uh... Is Mister Sae-Jin home? I wanted to talk to him regarding the appearances in the talk shows..."

" "

Stunned silly by this development, Yu Sae-Jung signaled Sae-Jin with her eyes and then, hid herself in the dressing room rather promptly.

*

Buried among all the eerie events where the huge number of Monsters appeared seemingly out of the blue regardless of time and location, several unexplainable 'incidents' began taking place as well.

Several reporters, Wizards, Alchemists and even Knights – all these people were met with puzzling accidents and died during the

hours where most would be fast asleep.

Although the SID suspected foul play, as there was not one shred of evidence recovered, they could only think of them as victims of the aforementioned unfortunate circumstances.

"....Excuse me, Miss Yu-Rin? Did you hear me? Surely, you can also tell that this is an important matter, no?" (Sae-Jin)

Of course, Sae-Jin knew very well that those deaths were linked to the 'hit list'. That was why he was in the middle of speaking the hard truths to Kim Yu-Rin, who came to see him regarding her work in the entertainment business.

Unfortunately, she didn't seem to hear him at all. All she did was to mumble continuously about quitting the entertainment industry altogether while carrying an utterly dejected facial expression.

"People are dying left, right and centre, Miss Yu-Rin. But in these dangerous times, you are planning to enter the Monster field all alone late at night? That is not only reckless, but also..." (Sae-Jin)

"You don't have to worry about me. I'm not someone who will easily crumble because of an ambush." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"But still, we don't know what..."

"Even if it's like that, that's not the issue at hand here. I'm quitting the industry not because of the reasons you think, but I fear that I've been focusing too much on the entertainment side of things. As a Knight, I should concentrate on my original duties, instead. And that's one of the reasons why I roam around in the Monster field as well. So, I would really appreciate it if you can respect my wishes." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Saying that there was nothing else left to say, Kim Yu-Rin stood up from her seat. After letting out yet another long sigh, she bowed her head and left.

'What should I do about this now?' (Sae-Jin)

Without a doubt, her current state was because of the Orc.

After Kim Yu-Rin left, Sae-Jin begun massaging his aching head.

"...Is she gone?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

But there was no time to worry about this matter. And that was because, creeping up on him stealthily like a cat, Yu Sae-Jung jumped on him with a strangely flushed face.

**

A week after Kim Yu-Rin quit the entertainment industry.

Completely unaware of the passage of time, Kim Sae-Jin was busy drifting along on the ocean.

The waves of the East Sea caressed his skin, and the gentle breeze as well as the warm sunlight made both his mind and body to feel rather lethargic.

His current appearance was not of a human but the 'Leviathan'.

The Leviathan naturally grew bigger without him needing to do anything; the body had grown to 140 centimetres long now, so it was too big to call it 'Athany' anymore, and the power this body carried also saw a huge increase as well. To understand how powerful he had become, not one hyena-like opportunistic sea Monster dared to get close to him as he just floated on the water, doing absolutely nothing.

Uuooong...

From a distance, a wave crashed into him. Of course, it wasn't a naturally occurring phenomenon but Sae-Jin trying to appease his boredom with a bit of impromptu surfing by controlling the water.

Pah-Aaang!

The cresting wave tickled past his skin and created a rollercoaster ride for him in an instant.

'Another for ma, mother...' (TL: Ooookay, so, this random bit of

utterance here is our MC suddenly reciting a poem written in the 40s by a Korean poet Yun Dohng-Joo, called "별헤는 밤", TLed as "Counting the Stars at Night". There is an English translation of it floating around the web, done by a bloke named Alex Rose. I'm using his version here.)

SFX for weapons colliding

While he was peacefully reciting a poem and blissfully enjoying the tranquil calmness of it all, out of the blue, he could hear the harmonious noises of weapons and Mana colliding from a distant beach.

When he raised his head a little to take a gander, he spotted three Knights and an Ogre having an intense battle over there.

Sae-Jin began observing the scene of this untimely battlefield.

Two men and one woman, affiliated with... 'Goryeo' Knights Order. It was one of the Orders that were practically pleading with Sae-Jin of late. That was probably because, the Dawn Order which previously occupied a similar position in the rankings had soared past them and flew towards the heavens, currently competing against the Raven for the top spot, while other rivals were busy forcing their way from below, threatening them.

'Mm?'

However, out of the three over there, Sae-Jin realised he knew the lone female of the group. It was Jung Eun-Ji. She had been constantly contacting him through his SNS profile, or via the Guild as if her Order, well, ordered her to do so.

'Well, doesn't that... look a bit dangerous?' (Sae-Jin)

Just now, the sword of one of the Knights got broken by the Ogre's club.

The strength of this particular Ogre seemed high, as it was a Two-Horned Grey Ogre, known to be a cumbersome Monster to fight against. The flow of the battle seemed to be on the knife-edge.

Looked like the Knights were holding on thanks to the effects of potions, but...

After observing the battle for a while longer, Sae-Jin decided to help them out a bit in order to test the rapidly-growing Leviathan Form's current level of combat strength.

He opened his mouth wide and gathered Mana there.

Goooooh...

He changed the naturally-occurring Mana resonating and converging in his mouth into the element that Ogres were weak against: 'fire'. At the sudden transformation of the atmosphere, storm winds whipped up violently and large ripples expanded out on the water's surface.

Boasting a deep crimson colour, the flames gathered near the Leviathan's maws and formed a distinguishable shape, before... firing out like a Dragon's Breath attack in the blink of an eye.

"...Phew!!"

...Unfortunately, the sound effect was still quite a bit lacking, mostly thanks to his young age.

Still, the flames gathered in front of his mouth exploded out forward like a giant pillar of fire.

The pure flames of hell burned the sea water and the atmosphere around it – and in less than a moment's breath, it arrived at that distant beach and covered the Ogre's entire torso.

"Kkyack!!" (Jung Eun-Ji)

"Eu, eu-uh?! What the f*ck!!"

The hyper-hot boiling flames of the 'Breath' melted the Ogre's upper body in one blink, and at this display of overwhelming destructive might, not only the Knights, even Sae-Jin was shocked out of his mind.

'Wha, what the hell is this sh*t?!' (Sae-Jin)

Right then, Jung Eun-Ji pointed towards Sae-Jin's direction after searching the surroundings in a hurry. Panicking somewhat, he quickly dived underwater to escape.

*

""

The three Knights dumbfoundedly stared at the spot where the mysterious creature spouting that flames was just now.

"...What was that?" Asked Jung Eun-Ji.

"It dived under the water's surface just now."

One of the male Knights answered, his face still slack from the shock.

"...You know I can also see that, right?" (Jung Eun-Ji)

"Could it have been a dragon?"

"Huh?!" (Jung Eun-Ji)

"I mean..."

The male Knight pointed at the Ogre's half-melted corpse. That incredible pillar of flames didn't stop at simply blasting away the Ogre, but it also blazed past and burned a huge circular hole in the thick forest behind them.

"But well, if that was really a dragon, it should have flown away instead of diving under water, right?" (Jung Eun-Ji)

"...You think so too? It sure is weird, seeing a creature with wings dive into water."

"Yep. It really is weird." (Jung Eun-Ji)

All three of them continued to stare at the distant ocean in awkward silence for a while, hoping that, maybe, the creature might pop back up again.

Finding out that the Leviathan Form possessed this much might proved to be both a great harvest and yet another matter to worry about for Sae-Jin.

If this Form grew up a bit more, then defeating all those Boss-level Monsters appearing in the future would be a piece of cake – but on the flip side, if the only condition for the continued growth was the passage of time, then it also meant that he'd fail at trying to rein in the instincts that were on par with that incredible might pretty soon as well.

SFX for the phone ring

As he drove home while filled to the brim with worries, Sae-Jin's phone suddenly went off. It was from Hazeline, according to the LCD screen.

"Hello, Miss Hazeline. What can I do for you?"

- "Ah, Mister Sae-Jin. Well, nothing in particular, although I'm calling you because, I was thinking, now that a meeting for the potion export deal has been scheduled, wouldn't it be nice~ if Mister Sae-Jin also attends it?"
 - "...When will it be?"
 - "It's next week Tuesday." (Hazeline)

Next week Tuesday... he muttered to himself while combing his memories to see if he had anything scheduled that day. Other than getting achievements as Jin Seh-Hahn, though, he had nothing lined up.

"But, uh... do I really have to show up?" (Sae-Jin)

However, he felt too lazy for that. After all, it wouldn't be wrong to say he was currently living three separate lives... So, he'd like to not go to meetings where his presence wasn't absolutely needed.

- "Ah... Well... Even if you don't come... But, it'll be better if you do. I mean, if Mister Sae-Jin does show up, the other party will

think, we're being treated fairly~ and stuff like that. And when the news spreads around, other countries will compete with one another in order to not lose out, right? And so, we lead them on a game of chicken..."

She began explaining in a haphazard fashion suddenly.

"In that case... I'll be there."

- "Oh, you promise?"

"Yes. Then, see you there."

- "Alright. I'll see you then."

Their 'business' had come to an end. Puzzlingly, though, Hazeline spat out a wistful sigh and didn't hang up first.

"Uh, so, should I hang up first?"

- "…"

Hazeline didn't reply.

She acted this way lately. For some reason, she had been calling him for trivial matters, and the emotions hidden in her voice seemed quite far removed from normal as well.

"Is there something else you'd like to talk about?"

- "....Actually, you see, I went to a certain restaurant..."
- "I'm hanging up."
- "Ah!! Wait!! This is an interesting stor..."

Kim Sae-Jin resolutely hung up.

< 31. All Tangled Up (2) > Fin.

Chapter 106: All Tangled Up (3)

It was a day in early October, as leaves were dyeing in the Autumn winds.

On a beach located somewhere near the East Sea where the public access was strictly prohibited, quite a few Knights stood there, busy watching the vast blue ocean. Every single one of them were here to satisfy their curiosity, but funnily enough, the rate of gender split was 7 to 3 – there were far more female Knights than males present. And yes, most of the guys who came here did so for the ladies, rather than the sea itself.

"...A hatchling of the ocean, you say?"

With an expression that said how unconvinced he was, a male Knight asked a female Knight.

"Yes. Apparently, it appears on every weekend."

The female Knight replied with a bright smile.

Although this was still a part of Mid Tier Monster field, everyone present all suffered from high enough ranks and spare time and so, they showed much leisure while treating this beach as a perfect spot for dating.

And the reason why they had gathered here? A single rumour quietly spreading among the ranks of Mid Tier and above.

'A hatchling of the ocean.'

A cute and charming little Monster that floated on the ocean's surface. Those Knights who came earlier to take a look said the creature even smiled and waved its 'hand' at them.

"Just wait for a little bit longer. I hear it's really, really cute."

"Yeah, well... Doesn't matter to m..."

"Oh!! There it is!"

Then, someone pointed towards the water's surface and shouted out loudly. Surprised by this outburst, everyone quickly changed the direction of their gazes and sharpened their eyes.

And sure enough, there it was, a single lifeform floating around lazily like a buoy.

Its body may have been slightly on the wrong side of being wide and flat, but thanks to its cute puppy-crossed-with-seal countenance leaving a favourable impression behind, it was nicknamed the hatchling of the ocean.

"Wow~"

Female Knights raised a huge fuss and began taking photos. Many guys present thought that the resulting images wouldn't be nice since the distance was too far – but then, their collective jaws fell to the floor when they spotted one or two ladies whip out cameras equipped with wide-angle lenses.

"Hey, wait a minute here... It might be cute and all, but still, if that thing is really a hatchling, then... uh, shouldn't we kill it now? We have no idea what that thing will morph into in the future." (Unnamed idiot Knight)

What he said was true – even Monsters like Treynos that resembled a rhino, looked cute and cuddly when young, grew up to be a violent and vicious b*****d. On top of that, didn't someone mention that this hatchling was capable of shooting out a Breath attack?

"Huh? You wanna kill it? What nonsense are you spewing out right now?!"

Almost instantly, sharp and hostile stares focused on this guy. He quickly mumbled something about it being a joke while he scratched the back of his neck.

*

Kim Sae-Jin came out to the East Sea twice a week.

He was thinking that, since he couldn't do anything about the growth of this Leviathan Form that only needed the passage of time, he might as well enjoy the ocean in the meanwhile. After all, the sea gave peace and tranquility to those who were strong, thus affording him some time to sort out his thoughts alone.

'They showed up again.'

However, a handful of ruffians began appearing to disturb his peace lately.

Maybe it was because he was still stuck in some kind of transition period in its growth, this Athany Form moved rather slowly in water. And that was why he chose to swim as close to the land mass as possible. But as if the rumours had gotten around, way too many onlookers had come around to gawk at him.

Initially, since the number was low, he thought their actions were cute and so didn't feel too bothered by them. Hell, he even performed a public service and waved his hand at them, too.

But as time went on, more and more people showed up, and whenever they saw Sae-Jin, they began screaming 'kkyack, kkyack'... So, how could he get some much needed peace and tranquility in this chaos?

Even worse, as Sae-Jin was doing his best to suppress his rising irritation...

"Shouldn't we kill it now?"

The words caught in his sensitive hearing caused his blood to boil in anger.

'Speaking some harsh words there, aren't you...'

And so, Sae-Jin decided to put fear of god in them, and then, began controlling the sea.

Wuuuuooong....

From the bottom of the ocean, an ominous vibration could be

felt.

Soon after, the sounds of the Knights' cheering stopped.

All of them dumbfoundedly stared past Sae-Jin the Athany, towards the vast ocean.

And then... rather than cheers, they began screaming at the top of their lungs, and THEN, began running for their lives without even looking back.

Only then did Sae-Jin realise something had gone terribly wrong, so he turned around to see what was happening.

" "

KHUGOOOOO

A massive wave that was over 30 metres tall was crashing towards the coastline like an undulating lifeform.

"....phew."

...Oh.

So, a Leviathan can become this strong while in the water, huh.

That was Sae-Jin's dazed thoughts just before he got swallowed up by the immense wave.

*

66 9:

Around 20 minutes later.

Stealthily changing back to the human appearance, Sae-Jin was hurriedly walking within the Monster field.

Thankfully, he regained his composure in the middle of the wave and weakened the ferocity of it, so the actual damage to human lives should be minimal, but... Unfortunately, trees, plants, sand, whatever as far as his eyes could see, were all soaked to the bone by the sea water. 'What a troll move this was.'

Whenever he walked, water splashed below his feet. On top of that, the urgent notification sounded loudly from his smart watch, relaying an emergency message.

[From the Ministry of Public Safety and Security]

[Emergency situation. October 8th 16:13. 20 metre-high tsunami waves detected on the coast of the East Sea. We urge all the residents living near the East Sea in Gangwon Province as well as Knights currently in the Monster field to evacuate the area immediately.]

Sae-Jin scratched the back of his neck while reading the message. A momentary lapse in controlling his powers had led to a huge mess...

'I better run away.'

Kim Sae-Jin hurriedly moved his feet.

But as he was running away in haste, he couldn't help but come to a stand still after finding a rather familiar silhouette in the distance.

Her long hair tied in braids and pulled up in a clean style, revealing a white and slender neck; a narrow waist and contrastingly well endowed hips – the woman who was just as stunning even from behind, Kim Yu-Rin.

He heard that she 'came to work' to Monster field everyday – currently, she was staring at a certain place while completely soaked from head to toe. Sae-Jin slowly walked towards her, who looked kind of lonely.

"Miss Yu-Rin."

At his gentle call, she ended up getting spooked rather wonderfully.

"Uhm... Guild Master? What are you doing here..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Sae-Jin smiled almost imperceptibly.

"I was out hunting, but then, a tsunami just so happened to rush in. But what are you doing here, Miss Yu-Rin? Looks like you got done in by the waves – didn't you receive the emergency notification to evacuate?"

"No, I, uh, did receive it, but..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

She swallowed the rest of her sentence down in slight bitterness. At the end of where she had been looking at, was the village of the Hero Orcs. The sudden waves did hit the surrounding mud walls but thankfully, there didn't seem to be any further issues beyond that.

"We're told to evacuate, so let's go." (Sae-Jin)

Kim Yu-Rin alternated her gaze between the village and Sae-Jin before powerlessly nodding her head. Soon, the two of them began walking through the Monster field.

Probably because of the effects of the tsunami (?), the entire Monster field seemed cloaked heavily in deep silence, as if all the Monsters and Knights had ran off to somewhere safe and dry.

They conversed while crossing the wet forest. Well, Sae-Jin was the one talking, while Kim Yu-Rin just listened.

"You seem to lack energy for some reason lately." (Sae-Jin)

"Pardon? Ah... No, it's just that, I've been feeling the 'wall'. Recently, worries about things like, 'Can I grow even further than this' have been entering my thoughts."

"Is that so? To think that a Highest Tier Knight thinks of such matters..." (Sae-Jin)

It was right then.

From somewhere, a strange fluctuation of Mana could be felt. Kim Yu-Rin too had sensed this oddity and quickly unsheathed her sword. "...There is something out here. Guild Master, please stick behind me."

The moment her expression hardened, the atmosphere changed rapidly. Now, they could sense the flow of Mana more openly, and she quickly dragged Sae-Jin to her rear as if to hide him and vigilantly surveyed the surrounding areas.

"I also know how to fight, Miss Yu-Rin."

However, Kim Sae-Jin formed a weapon with Mana and stepped forward.

Just now, a certain scent of blood tickled his nose. Being able to hide one's presence and scent to this degree meant that the 'guest' this time was not going to be a simple pushover.

'Looks like them carrying out the hits on the hit list wasn't an unrealistic feat, after all.' (Sae-Jin)

SFX for smoke rising suddenly

Then, smoke began pouring out and four humanoid shapes rose up from the ground. Out of the four, three of them were totally covered in red robes, but this one guy alone had his face fully displayed.

Pale white skin and eyes dyed in the colours of blood.

The handsome man smiled in an entirely suspicious manner and looked at both Sae-Jin and Kim Yu-Rin's direction.

"A pleasant day's greetings to you both. And we should thank the advent of one unexpected calamity, as we are finally able to grace each other's company."

Inside this rather desolate forest, a man wearing a formal blacktie suit greeted the two in a stiff manner of an European nobility that matched his Western face.

"I am Count Rahaimde. I've woken up from a long slumber and made this arduous personal journey in order to reap both of your lives with my own two hands."

The tone of his voice was deeply exaggerated and theatrical. Sae-Jin and Kim Yu-Rin both narrowed their brows dumbfoundedly at the sudden entrance of this anachronistic man. What the hell was up with this strange stage actor-like dude?

Then, Sae-Jin remembered it.

"Rahaimde...."

After a short murmuring later, Sae-Jin's eyes opened wide.

"Ah."

Now he understood why this name rang a bell.

The House of Count Rahaimde. A renowned noble back in the other world, Rahaimde even served as a Margrave in a certain corrupt kingdom, even though he was a Vampire. In other words, his skills were quite considerable.

Of course, his House had been in decline for ages already. And when he came to Earth, he fell into a coma because of all the Vampire hunting back in the past. The Vampire Lord might have granted the man his second life, but still, his ability could not be dismissed as something trivial.

In terms of the actual combat prowess, Rahaimde was a powerful figure that none of the current Vampire Lord descendants could ignore.

The Vampires in the Rahaimde House could control 'blood' at will. Not only their own, but the others as well, provided the target had come in contact with the Rahaimde blood.

The viciously cruel and battle-loving Rahaimde carried about 2~3 times more blood within his body, and slaughtered all living things who obviously couldn't live without blood... or so Sae-Jin had heard.

Sae-Jin also heard from the spy he had planted amidst the

Vampires that this Rahaimde was someone to watch out for.

"...Who is this crazy b*****d?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Ahahaha. For a lady, your words are rather unrefined, no?" (Rahaimde)

Kim Yu-Rin sharply glared at the Vampires. Then, Rahaimde smiled leisurely and expelled blood out from his body. And it sure was a grotesque sight to behold, blood endlessly pouring out from all the holes in his body – eyes, nose, ears, sweat pores, etc, etc.

"What the hell is that..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

The blood exiting into the air spread widely around like a red mist. Kim Yu-Rin had covered herself in the ever-reliable Mana Barrier, but she sensed a certain trepidation from that red mist so she quickly took several steps back.

"A Mana Barrier? Hahaha. I'll have you know, such petty trickery will not aid you today." (Rahaimde)

The thinly-dispersing blood particles were smaller than Mana – no bigger than atoms, in fact – and could easily permeate past the Mana Barrier and enter through one's skin. And if a minute amount of that blood entered the target's body, then, BOOM!! The blood contained within the body would explode.

"And with this... This will be our fourth successful mission." (Rahaimde)

Rahaimde thought about the hit list and a grin broke out on his face.

And when the red mist slowly approached his targets...

His blood in gaseous form suddenly coagulated back into liquid and fell down to the ground.

"...Huh?!" (Rahaimde)

Falling into a confused state of panic, Rahaimde tried to control his blood once more. Unfortunately for him, the blood on the ground didn't even budge as if it had turned into a stone.

"Miss Yu-Rin, looks like we don't have to worry anymore." (Sae-Jin)

Meanwhile, Sae-Jin glanced at Rahaimde and chuckled.

This was the reason why Sae-Jin remembered Rahaimde's name so clearly.

Blood was a form of moisture, but not all moisture was blood. To figure out which of the two was superior between the ability to control all moisture and the ability to control only blood, one didn't need to think too deeply about it.

"Fortunately, my Trait seems to overwhelm his." (Sae-Jin)

Of course, as Sae-Jin's Skill Proficiency Level was still low, the Vampire would hold an advantage in terms of 'area of effect', but that much could be overcome with Kim Yu-Rin helping him out.

"...What crazy nonsense are you blabbering on about, you knave!!!" (Rahaimde)

The previously-dazed Rahaimde took offense at Sae-Jin's words and roared out at the top of his lungs in an unbridled rage that could rip the heavens apart. He then extracted even more blood out from his body and changed it into numerous shapes that resembled needles before shooting them out.

Rahaimde believed that, without a doubt, this barrage of blood needles would pierce through the gaps of Mana and definitely kill the two targets.

"What?! But, why!! I say, why?!" (Rahaimde)

Too bad. Just like before, his blood powerlessly liquified as soon as it got near the two and fell to the ground. Rahaimde stomped on the ground like a petulant child and exploded in a fit of rage.

"I, I will, rip apart those two scums with...!!" (Rahaimde)

Unable to calm his soaring anger, Rahaimde extracted even more

blood out from his body again.

Kim Yu-Rin was busy tilting her head in confusion, unable to figure out what this Vampire was trying to do, while Sae-Jin was barely holding back his laughter from leaking out.

"Eu, euuhhhhh!!!!!" (Rahaimde)

Out from Rahaimde's entire body, blood rose up powerfully.

...Seeing this, Sae-Jin thought that, if left alone, this Rahaimde guy would keel over automatically after tiring himself out.

< 31. All Tangled Up (3) > Fin.

Chapter 107: All Tangled Up (4)

"But, what..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Just leave him be. It'll be better for us if he tires himself out like that." (Sae-Jin)

Kim Yu-Rin and Sae-Jin looked at Rahaimde, their eyes shining with interest. The Vampire's body had swelled up like a puffer fish while he continued to struggle – it almost seemed like he'd go POP at any moment now.

"...But still, Guild Master, do you have an inkling as to what is happening here right now?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Meanwhile, Kim Yu-Rin asked Sae-Jin as she glanced at him with the corner of her eyes. She found this situation totally not understandable. Out of the blue, a tsunami wave swept by without warning, then Kim Sae-Jin appeared out of seemingly nowhere, and then, getting ambushed by a crazy guy and his gang, to boot...

"Ah, that. Well... I did tell you, right? Currently..." (Sae-Jin)

"Gheu uhhhhh!!" (Rahaimde)

Before Sae-Jin could explain, with a loud roar, the Vampire's amassed blood pounced on them like a raging sea current. The blood wriggled around like a living being, but still, it fell to the ground powerlessly as soon as it got near Sae-Jin's vicinity.

"...Currently, there have been a lot of unexplained incidents. These guys are the culprits responsible." (Sae-Jin)

"Culprits?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Yes. The Lycan said that the Vampires are planning something really big and evil, and this is apparently their first step. Getting rid of those who might cause trouble for them later on – the so-called 'hit list', in other words." (Sae-Jin)

"......Why are you telling me about such an important matter

only now?!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Falling in a silent daze for a moment, Kim Yu-Rin suddenly shouted out, flustered. Another demonstration of how heavy the Lycan's name value was, right there.

"We've already set the date for the press conference to do that exactly. And I've mentioned this to you before, remember? That it's dangerous for you to move around alone." (Sae-Jin)

"...You... well, you did, but... But still, you should've told me the details..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"But the rumours have spread around already, though?" (Sae-Jin)

For now, they have remained tight-lipped at the government's request, but rumours of the Lycan planning to announce something big as well as the existence of a certain hit list had been in circulation within the financial world and between Knights for some time by now.

"Is, is that right? I've been preoccupied lately, so..." (Kim Yu-Rin)
"Eu uhhhh!!"

Another abnormal roar resounded out in the middle of their conversation.

"...In any case, you're saying that person over there is a Vampire?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Yes. You can tell that he's an evil doer pretty easily, no?" (Sae-Jin)

Kim Yu-Rin nodded lightly and poured Mana into her sword. Sharp and chilly blue Mana clung on to the surface of the slightly-chipped blade.

"Sir Rahaimde, please get a hold on yourself." (Unnamed Vampire goon)

Only when that razor-sharp threat surfaced did the other

Vampires begin trying to stop Rahaimde's madness.

"...Fuu."

Looking as if he had lost over half of his original strength, Rahaimde finally stopped his crazed rampage. And while working hard to restore his calm demeanor, a thin smile slowly formed on his lips.

"Hahaha. How regrettable. That was your only chance to lessen the suffering and pain, but you have voluntarily surrendered such a wondrous opportunity..."

Indeed, it was regrettable for Sae-Jin as well, as Rahaimde changed tactic and unsheathed the sword mounted on his hips. It was crimson coloured as if made out of blood; at the same time, other three Vampires began reciting a chant.

"Miss Yu-Rin. Please maintain a certain distance from me while we engage the enemies." (Sae-Jin)

Now that Rahaimde had lost his stupidity for good, Sae-Jin too had lost all the leisure as well.

"And whatever happens, do not let that sword touch you." (Sae-Jin)

That blood-red sword in Rahaimde's hands – there really was blood soaked into the blade. No matter how superior Sae-Jin's Trait was, as long as the moisture wasn't airborne, he couldn't control it. So, even the smallest cut would prove totally disastrous.

"I've been fighting for over ten years now. So, don't worry about me." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin was confident, as always.

Sae-Jin let a slight chuckle out and concentrated Mana into his hand. The blue-coloured Mana shifted into a weapon that was perfect for the foe at hand, a lengthy spear that could help him maintain a safe distance.

"...Go." (Unnamed Vampire goon)

Unfortunately, the opponent wasn't only Rahaimde. Before they knew it, the chanting of the other Vampires were complete, and countless Monsters were summoned to the area.

SFX for a loud roar of a Monster

The owner of the roar that shook the earth was the guardian of the underworld, Cerberus. Hundreds of Gargoyles blanketed the sky above. Giant Worms wiggled and burrowed their way out from the ground, accompanied by hundreds of creatures such as Golems and Ghouls.

""

Against this horde, a lengthy spear wasn't going to cut it. So, Sae-Jin stealthily changed the shape of the weapon. And when Kim Yu-Rin accidentally saw the newly-formed weapon, her eyes went extra-round.

In his hand was a blue mace.

"You know how to wield that?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

A mace was avoided by most of the Knights as it was a difficult weapon to master. Firstly, the might of this weapon heavily depended upon the wielder's physical strength rather than the proficiency in controlling Mana. And then, because of its unusual shape, concentrating Mana into a blunt form to fit the weapon was also incredibly hard as well.

"...Let's talk about that later!" (Sae-Jin)

Too bad, Kim Yu-Rin couldn't get to hear his answer.

Koong! Koong!! Koong!!!

Triggered by Rahaimde's roar, all the Monsters surrounding the two rushed in.

Sae-Jin swung his mace towards the incoming flood of Monsters.

Every swing of the mace ripped asunder the very air they breathed, and each strike turned Golems into crumbs of stone, while Ghouls were shredded apart into pieces. He didn't bother with things like technique. Just a single, complete swing of that mace was enough to blow up dozens of Monsters into smithereens.

'That is...' (Kim Yu-Rin)

And Kim Yu-Rin's eyes went even more rounder than before, as she even forgot about the grave situation she was in and observed Sae-Jin's fight. It might have looked like he was swinging that mace willy-nilly with total disregard for separating enemies from allies, but hidden within that simple whirlwind of destruction, there definitely was a rule of some kind.

Enemies approaching closer were killed off relying only on brutal strength. And the moment when an attack was about to land on him, Sae-Jin struck the ground instead and caused a massive quake. And during the opening created by that very quake, he dashed in and landed a deadly blow to the Monster's head...

Kwahaang!!!

The mace slammed on the ground once more and yet another powerful tremor erupted out.

Just like that, with a few well-timed mace slams on the ground, the entire battlefield turned into a land of unbridled chaos mired in cruel viciousness. Only things left behind on the broken and jutting landscape was a scene straight out of hell, torn and mangled bits of flesh and blood showering and littering everywhere.

'How can he fight like that Orc...?' (Kim Yu-Rin)

Although the overall power and the ferocity were so much weaker, that battle style was something Kim Yu-Rin was intimately familiar with. She was sure of it, since she had sparred countless times with the Hero Orc Chieftain.

Of course, it was currently impossible for her to agonise over how Sae-Jin seemingly had absorbed and used the Orc's fighting style as if it was his own.

SFX for a loud roar of a Monster

The mist of Monsters' blood clinging on its body, the Cerberus spewed flames of hell from its three mouths before baring its vicious fangs and pounced on her.

"Heup!!"

However, such summoned creatures were easy for Kim Yu-Rin to deal with.

For her Trait 'Desideratum', imbuing the purpose of 'snatching the life away from a living being' was impossible even against the most insignificant creatures – but the story changed drastically if the recipient was a summoned.

As long as she wasn't fighting against a Monster like the Leviathan, which couldn't be summoned without a catalyst or be un-summoned without getting rid of that said catalyst, cancelling the summoning was actually far easier than knocking the creature out.

KHEUHhhhhh....

Although it was the slightest of tickles by her sword, the Cerberus couldn't even finish its roar before disappearing completely.

Of course, it was still the guardian of hell. Yu-Rin sensed nearly 20% of her Mana reserve draining out of her. She then quickly kicked the ground and headed towards the three Vampire Wizards who were trying to redo the summoning.

"...You despicable scum!!" (Rahaimde)

Rahaimde ignored Yu-Rin shooting past him and focused only on Sae-Jin. He was like a prize racehorse looking only forward; he even slaughtered Monsters summoned by his men when they ended up blocking his way.

"You insolent fool!!" (Rahaimde)

Arriving in front of Sae-Jin, Rahaimde grandly slashed out with his sword.

The blood-red sword drew a half-moon arc as it successfully sliced apart Sae-Jin's Mana mace in two. A thick smile crept up on Rahaimde's mouth, and as his prized 'blood sword' was about to thrust into Sae-Jin's chest...

"!!!"

Rahaimde sensed a threat of looming death coming from behind and he quickly rolled on the ground to avoid it.

Almost at the same time, a lone blue spike shot up from the ground the Vampire was standing on moments ago. He didn't even have time to wonder what the hell that was – the threat of death brushed past his senses once more, and then...

"Kkheuck!!"

Another blue spike shot up and sliced open a wound on Rahaimde's body.

"What sort of cheap trickery is this?!" (Rahaimde)

The blue spikes continued to inundate him even in the middle of his shouts.

SFX for sharp things flying through the air

The spikes no longer appeared only from the ground, but also started pouring down from the air as well while making earpiercing whistles. Rahaimde hurriedly beat a hasty retreat, but those blue spikes didn't give him any breathing room whatsoever and persistently chased him down.

Rahaimde thought of getting assistance from the fellow Vampires, but when he took a glance, he could see that the situation over there was just as bad as here. No, it looked actually worse. A single sword slash from Kim Yu-Rin easily sliced apart one of the Vampire Wizards and his magic shield, and the rushing Gargoyles trying to protect their owners couldn't even leave behind a scratch mark on her Mana Barrier.

"A bunch of useless... Urk!!" (Rahaimde)

Just as his focus shifted for a brief second, a mace was thrown towards his way. Rahaimde could only issue a short cry as the weapon struck him right in the middle of his forehead and he collapsed on the ground.

"...Eut!"

As soon as Rahaimde was out for the count, Sae-Jin turned all his attention towards the rest of the Monsters.

However... his consciousness began to drift away. As expected, trying to control external Mana not of his own placed too much of a burden on him. The whole thing didn't even last one minute, yet... As things stood, he probably didn't even have much Mana left in him to form another weapon.

WAKE UP!!

Just as his mind was blacking out and the boiling instincts were about to burst forth from within and replace the 'human' Kim Sae-Jin...

A lone shout from somewhere stabbed his ears. Sae-Jin struggled hard to regain control of his fading consciousness, and resolutely opened his eyes wider. He then grabbed the head of a Ghoul with a voracious, drooling jaw and crushed it.

SFX for a sword slash

After that, a crystal clear sword aura swept across the battlefield, slicing apart all the Monsters surrounding him.

On a certain area within the Monster field.

There were shredded bits of flesh and blood strewn about everywhere; the ground was completely devastated, not one spot avoiding destruction.

"...Pant, pant...."

Within this bloody hell, Sae-Jin was sitting weakly on the ground, trying to catch his breath.

This battle would have been a piece of cake if he changed into either the Orc or the Lycanthrope, but as a mere 'human', he literally had to go through hell. And now, he was beset with the type of fatigue he had never ever felt before in his entire life, something that could only come after squeezing every ounce of Mana out from himself and moving his body to the absolute physical limit.

Kim Yu-Rin's condition was marginally better. Although totally covered in sweat, she still had some strength left to stand unassisted. However, she was currently pouring that strength into making her brain spin a bit faster.

She recalled the sight of Sae-Jin wielding that mace once more. Someone once said that, each and every fighter had their own unique way of fighting. Sae-Jin's way was incredibly similar to that of the Hero Orc. Even the appearance of him roaring out while rampaging around was the same, too.

Kim Yu-Rin turned to focus her gaze on him. He certainly looked a lot weaker than the Orc, sitting on the ground and panting heavily – still, she observed him for a long, long time with a pair of suspicious eyes, before opening her mouth.

"Mister Kim Sae-Jin."

A sudden intrusion of a cold voice pricked his ear drums.

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"...Ye, yes?"
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He turned his head to look. Kim Yu-Rin was staring at him with an incredibly sharp pair of eyes.

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As she stared at him, several questions regarding this and that floated around in her head.

A similar battle style to that of the Hero Orc's... And previously, he said he was friendly with the Hero Orcs and could arrange a meeting with the Chieftain. And now that she thought about it, she began to wonder why he had been using the name 'the Orc' when working as a blacksmith.

"So, let's say, hypothetically..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Her voice was heavy and serious. Sae-Jin's body trembled imperceptibly as if he too sensed the warning signs.

"...Maybe, just maybe..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

She then stopped talking there.

What is the relationship between this man and the Orc? He probably cannot completely deny having any ties with the Orc. There is definitely something wrong here. Definitely something...

"....Uhm, what should we do about that guy over there?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Unfortunately, she couldn't spit out what she was thinking about, and ended up pointing at Rahaimde who was lying sprawled on the ground.

"...Ah. Uh... well, let's apprehend him, for now..." (Sae-Jin)

Feeling panicky inside, Sae-Jin did his best to maintain a poker face while he grabbed Rahaimde.

< 31. All Tangled Up (4) > Fin.

Chapter 108: All Tangled Up (5)

"...What are you going to do with that Vampire?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Inside the British luxury SUV, Kim Yu-Rin's favourite ride. (TL: a Range Rover, perhaps?)

Kim Yu-Rin signaled towards the quietly-prone Rahaimde on the back seat using her eyes and asked.

"Hmm. Well, I could hand him over to the SID... something like that." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin had half a mind to make sure the vile b*****d would never wake up again, since it seemed the unconscious Vampire was far too strong for the Dark Energy Link to properly work.

But then, he didn't want to give up on earning yet another bit of achievement by bringing this guy in, as cheap as that sounded. Also, it was still illegal to summarily execute a Vampire without going through a proper trial.

"Hmph."

Kim Yu-Rin snorted once.

No more conversation happened after that. He did try his best to initiate one, but her facial expression was way too stiff for that. It was as if she was locked into some serious thought process or some such.

Since Sae-Jin had something to feel guilty about anyways, he decided to follow the old mantra of 'Doing nothing leads one down the middle path'.

"Wait!! What are you doing?" (Sae-Jin)

"...Huh?"

"We're going the wrong way!!" (Sae-Jin)

Unfortunately, though - Kim Yu-Rin wasn't paying attention to

her driving and as a result, she missed the off ramp and ended up going straight ahead. She hurriedly looked around for a chance the turn the vehicle around, but well, they were on a piece of road where making a U-turn was impossible.

"W, why didn't you tell me sooner?!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

After giving up, she sent a gaze full of resentment towards Sae-Jin in the passenger side.

"Why are you getting angry at me?" (Sae-Jin)

"I've never driven on this road before. And it hasn't been long since I got my licence, so I'm not that good a driver yet. But here I am, tasked to bringing Mister Sae-Jin back home..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Only after going the wrong way did Kim Yu-Rin concentrate on her driving.

And time relentlessly marched on. 20 minutes, 30 minutes, 40 minutes... Crossing a distance which 10 minutes would have sufficed, cost them one full hour, and worse still, they were...

"Wait, isn't that the city of Pyongyang?" (Sae-Jin)

From Gangwon Province to Pyongyang in one hour!!As expected of an extraordinary invention, the Mana Car. (TL: Oh, so it's not a Range Rover, then... Also, oops, looks like there is no South Korea in this novel, just a United Republic of Korea. Don't feel like going back to old chapters and changing them, so, oh well...)

"....." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"To drive all the way till Pyongyang from Gangwon without the aid of a map... Truly impressive, Miss Yu-Rin. Great driving." (Sae-Jin)

All Kim Yu-Rin could do at Sae-Jin's sarcastic remark was to pout unceasingly and silently steer the car.

"I wonder, how long will we need to go to Gangwon from here."

(Sae-Jin)

"...If you don't stop now, I will leave you behind here." (Kim Yu-Rin)

As far as she was concerned, that sounded like an effective warning, but for Sae-Jin, it was actually not a bad suggestion to consider.

"I can take over driving for you, if you'd like. But besides that, why haven't you turned on the satnay?" (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin reached towards the centre console to switch on the GPS navigation. However, she slapped his hand away while narrowing her brows.

"I have my pride, Mister Sae-Jin. Please do not interfere." (Kim Yu-Rin)

""

Pride? What pride?!

Sae-Jin dumbfoundedly stared at her.

A pair of stiff-as-rock hands grabbing the steering wheel tightly; her neck cranked out like that of an elderly turtle while her face contorted unnaturally as she surveyed the surroundings... No way in hell something like pride had a room in that.

'I just hope that we get there within two hours...' (Sae-Jin)

"Keu, keuuuuu..."

It was then, the 'drunkard' lying on the backseat showed signs of waking up. Sae-Jin quickly formed another mace and slammed it hard on the forehead of the waking Vampire.

Kkhoong!!

Accompanied a dull sound of impact, Rahaimde's face sank back down the seat cushion.

"...By the way, how long has it been since you started using a

mace?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin asked after observing him doing his thing, but then...

"No way!! You entered the wrong road, again!!" (Sae-Jin)

"What?! No, no, that can't be!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

One hour it was, for them to reach Pyongyang from Gangwon. But the return trip took two solid hours.

While regretting the decision to ride on Kim Yu-Rin's car right down to the bones, Kim Sae-Jin finally made his way back home.

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The following day.

Sae-Jin went to speak to Yu Baek-Song regarding what to do about Rahaimde. He suggested that, since there were a few suspicious individuals within the ranks of the SID, the captured Vampire should be locked up in the underground prison located below the Mercenary Company HQ where Mana couldn't be wielded. She consented to the idea.

After the meeting ended sooner than expected, Yu Baek-Song handed over a magazine about Knights over to him.

[The Knights Academy's most famous martial arts – 'quickest to become a Mid Tier' Jin Seh-Hahn's technique]

- Slow motion of the footage, breakdown of fist and foot movement, reading the flow of the fight, etc, etc... A thorough lecture containing all this, and more. The number of learners attending the lectures of Jin Seh-Hahn's "Jin Mudo" school has exceeded 300. The approval rating of the learners show no sign of decline; only the continuous upward climb. (TL: I left "Jin Mudo" (진무도) as is. It actually means, "Real Martial Arts", so uh, I'm sure you'll agree leaving it in Korean sounds more impressive…)

Several Cadets have been seen without carrying a weapon within the Academy grounds of late, and such behaviour is not being looked down on, either.

And we at XX magazine, are proud to present to you a timely interview with a hero emerging from the darkness like a rapid meteor blazing across the sky.

It was about Jin Seh-Hahn. Sae-Jin's brows furrowed as he read the article.

"You've become a real celebrity, huh." (Yu Baek-Song)

There was a leisurely smile hanging on Yu Baek-Song's lips as she looked at him.

Ever since she had climbed to the position of the Minister of Monster Affairs, she was constantly reminded of Kim Sae-Jin and his influences. Bosses that constantly got on her nerves were no more; even those petty attempts to hinder her saw a sharp decrease, 'them' unable to publically challenge her and remaining only as nothing more than some weak yapping behind her back.

It was the first time in her professional career where she could experience a stress-free work environment every single day, so she was understandably happy.

"...But, this might become a bigger problem if I get more famous than this..." (Sae-Jin)

In reality, the identity of Jin Seh-Hahn was one-time use only.

Although Sae-Jin said his goal was to reach the High Tier during the interview, the main aim was to get to the upper Mid Tier instead, where he'd gain the access to the information he was looking for. The original plan was to have the upper Mid Tier Jin Seh-Hahn meet with an untimely accident before he could become a High Tier, thereby leaving behind a tragic but juicy story for all.

"Argh, don't worry about that. A hero is an existence that gifts hope to the masses even in his death. Besides that, I see you've been getting along ve~ry well with fellow Knights, eh?" (Yu Baek-Song)

Yu Baek-Song clumsily dug out a mobile phone from somewhere.

It was indeed a mobile phone. Sae-Jin's eyes opened wide after witnessing something he thought he'd never see, since all of their communication involved landlines or via those magic notebooks right up until recently.

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"You bought a mobile phone?" (Sae-Jin)
"Yep."
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Yu Baek-Song showed him an image from the Internet search results. It was of Jin Seh-Hahn, Yi Yu-Jin and Goh Yun-Jong. Seeing this, Sae-Jin let out a forced chuckle and reached out towards the phone – only to have his hand angrily slapped away by Yu Baek-Song, who carefully embraced the phone in her chest as if it was the most precious treasure in the whole world.

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"No touch." (TL: lol. Actually, it's supposed to be "You're being rude.")

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"Ah. Oh, sorry..." (Sae-Jin)
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Afterwards, she continued to fidget around the phone with those small hands of hers. And whenever she found something funny, she'd laugh out loud like a kid and told him to take a look.

It was as if... for someone like her who had lived a dreary life without a phone until now, she had finally discovered a whole new world to explore.

Sae-Jin quietly studied her for a while. Funnily enough, he didn't feel bored watching her. He could only blame her gently-swaying tail and that pair of twitching cat ears on top of her head.

"...You know that the Lycan's press conference is next month, yes?" (Sae-Jin)

"Mm? Of course I know." (Yu Baek-Song)

"And do you also know that, as a slight exaggeration, the

contents are related to the end of the world?" (Sae-Jin)

66 27

She didn't even bother to answer him. After all, with her ears standing stiff and her eyes opened wide, she was totally immersed on a video she found online. It must have been a very interesting video, indeed...

Figuring that he had to snatch that phone away for the conversation to progress, Sae-Jin slowly reached out, but...

SFX for a low, threatening growl

....He had to withdraw his hand when he saw her glaring at him while baring her fangs, growling.

Sae-Jin could only stay there and witness her completely engrossed in the wonders of the Internet for the next 20 minutes, before leaving the place with the words, "I should get going now, another meeting to go to."

Unfortunately, that video didn't end until then.

Curious as to what she was watching so intently, Sae-Jin took a peek. He found her watching... an episode of the programme 'Animal Kingdom' that featured daily lives of untamed tigers in the wilderness. Chuckling to himself, Sae-Jin left her office without a proper send-off.

Walking towards the car park, he quickly climbed aboard his car and set the destination on the satnav to a certain restaurant in Gangwon Province.

With a good timing, his phone rang at the same time.

- "Hi, Mister Sae-Jin, where are you now?"

The friendly voice of an Elf, Hazeline's, came out of the receiver.

- "I'm on my way as we speak. What about you, Miss Hazeline?"
- "I'm also getting ready to set off.... riding on a bus."

- "A bus?!"
- "Yes."

Sae-Jin checked the time and the destination. There was enough room to spare, fortunately enough.

"In that case, wait for me at your place. I'll come and pick you up."

- "Pardon? No, no, you don't have to do that..."
- "Oh? If you feel that way, then..."
- "I'll be waiting for you at home~."

Hazeline hurriedly ended the call.

Smiling slightly, Sae-Jin turned on the ignition and stepped on the accelerator.

*

"Over here~."

After around five minutes, he could see a woman wearing a thick robe waving her hands through the windscreen. He was about to hit the brake to slow the car down, but then, felt the deeplysuppressed urge to play a prank rush out and take over...

"...Huh? W, where are you going?! Mister Sae-Jin!! Over here!! Heeey!! Stop!!!!!" (Hazeline)

He deliberately didn't stop the car and continued on. When he took a glance though the rear-view mirror, he saw Hazeline hurriedly running after the car, looking rather flustered.

This went on for another 200 metres or so. Thinking that he should probably end it here, he stopped the car and opened the passenger side door.

"Pant, pant.... Pant, pant..."

Panting heavily thanks to the untimely sprint done with all her power, she grabbed the door frame real tightly and shot him a glare – he was sure of Hazeline glaring at him, even though the hood was covering her eyes. But Sae-Jin maintained a nonchalant expression and held open the door.

"Ah, my apologies. Forgot where you lived." (Sae-Jin)

"Pant, pant... Forgot? Really? You were not like this before, but you seemed to have developed a mischievous streak lately. Would you like to taste the bitterness of a magic spell...?" (Hazeline)

"Get in. Or else I'll move the car again." (Sae-Jin)

""

She pulled the hood off as soon as she sat down on the passenger seat. She seemed unhappy, sweat from the unnecessary exercise sliding down on her face. However, the strands of wet hair clinging on to her skin only made her look more alluring.

"Shall we go?" (Sae-Jin)

"...Yes."

While on their way towards the restaurant, she didn't talk but continuously recited something to herself. Judging by how official the words sounded, they must have been either a script she had prepared in advance or the breakdown on various information she wanted to present.

And they arrived at the restaurant located in Seoul after 20 minutes of driving. (TL: Oh boy. Seoul isn't in Gangwon Province. Author made a mistake here.)

However, the scene surrounding that place was quite something else to behold.

There was a limo with the national flag of France draped all over it, as well as dozen escort vehicles filling up the entire parking lot, not to mention the countless bodyguards carrying swords on their waists guarding the area.

"What the... Did the Prime Minister come personally or

something?" (Sae-Jin)

"He did." (Hazeline)

"...Huh?!" (Sae-Jin)

"Prime Minister Roland has made his way here personally. That's why the meeting had been delayed slightly, to accommodate his busy schedule."

"But, I didn't hear of such a thing...?" (Sae-Jin)

"Oh, you haven't? I'm sorry. It's probably because Mister Sae-Jin has a habit of ignoring other people's phone calls."

Hazeline spoke as if it was nothing much and entered the restaurant. Kim Sae-Jin stood there dazed for a bit, before finally moving his feet after one of the bodyguards walked over to his direction.

*

Unlike with the USA, the meeting with the representatives from France who had all flew over to Korea personally, concluded rather smoothly.

After hearing the French Prime Minister greet him in Korean, saying "it's an honour", Sae-Jin found himself unable to speak properly – but Hazeline was quite the opposite, speaking her piece out like a professional. So much so, it was impossible to tell that this woman was the very same person who stuttered like there's no tomorrow during the seminar back then.

At the end of the two-hour long meeting, it was decided that the next country to receive the potion exports would be France. Sae-Jin quickly ran back to his car and extracted a weapon he crafted from the trunk, and gave it to the Prime Minister as a goodwill present.

The French PM returned with his entourage, pleased as a punch by the gift.

"Looks like everything went well." (Sae-Jin)

Watching the distancing cavalcade of limo and escort vehicles, two of them stood there, smiling in satisfaction.

And as they headed towards the parking lot while still carrying that smile, they heard a voice calling out to them.

"Oppa."

It was cold and hard, but a deeply familiar voice. Hazeline and Sae-Jin simultaneously turned around to look.

"...Sae-Jung?" (Sae-Jin)

It was Yu Sae-Jung. As if she had just left the Knights Order for the day, she was still wearing her Order uniform as she stood there, staring at the two. Her eyes as she alternated her gaze between them were indescribably cold.

"...You two seem to have gotten real friendly lately?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Oh, this is because of work..." (Sae-Jin)

"I already know that. The restaurant is owned by my family, after all. But I'm asking because you two seem really happy together, is all." (Yu Sae-Jung)

She walked in heavy footsteps, opened the passenger side door and climbed in first.

"Oppa, why aren't you getting in?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

At her chilly voice, Sae-Jin's body shook in fear, then he looked over at Hazeline. She too seemed deeply flustered as she pulled the hood over her head.

"Miss Hazeline, would you like to..." (Sae-Jin)

"Nope. I, I'm going home alone. It's fine, fine. It's not that far, anyhow." (Hazeline)

"Huh? No, wait a second..." (Sae-Jin)

"I'm telling you, it's fine!! Everything's cool, so please, quickly go. Sae-Jung, take care." (Hazeline)

"....You too, Unni. Bye."

At Hazeline's fervent dissuasion, Sae-Jin had no choice but to enter the car and start the ignition.

Through the mirror, he could see her lonely back as she walked away.

< 31. All Tangled Up (5) > Fin.

Chapter 109: King of the Infinite Ocean, Leviathan (1)

Although the ignition was turned on, the car hadn't moved.

"...I'm fine with you two meeting up for work, but I also prefer if you don't get too familiar with her." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Sitting on the passenger side, Yu Sae-Jung spoke at the dawdling Sae-Jin. Unlike other times, her voice was chilly and hard. Sae-Jin didn't reply back.

"I'm Oppa's girlfriend, right? Don't I have the right to ask for things like this?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

Only then did he turn his gaze towards her. Within her wet eyes, he saw the reflection of his own heavy expression.

"You're right." (Sae-Jin)

He returned his gaze back to front and pressed the accelerator. They drove past Hazeline by the roadside, standing there and waiting for the light to change on the pedestrian crossing.

Yu Sae-Jung stared at the side of his face for a short while, before lowering her head and sighing out weakly, muttering out some words under her breath.

"...I'm sorry. But Oppa will understand if you were in my shoes..." (Yu Sae-Jung)

""

Without saying anything, he gently grasped her hand.

"This... is this Oppa taking action without words?" (Yu Sae-Jung) She deliberately asked in a cheerful manner.

"...Yeah."

He answered her, albeit reluctantly.

November.

The eyes of the entire world had gathered on the Dawn Knights Order.

The reason was the Lycan's press conference.

Here, the number of people making quite a noisy scene easily exceeded the original capacity of 3000 for the Dawn Order's main auditorium that acted as the venue for the conference. These people were a disorganised collection of reporters, Knights and even Wizards, whose nationalities and species were hard to determine.

Also related to this conference, according to a certain memo/leaflet doing the rounds within the financial world as well as between the Knights Orders, there were quite a few speculations going on at the moment.

Some said, the Lycan was planning to reveal the true cause for all the Monster incidents happening of late; some posited that another Red Moon would pop up soon; or even, maybe that the Lycan was going to reveal himself to the public.

Most of the folks gathered here carried the opinion that the first option was likely the correct guess, while they waited for the arrival of the Lycan's spokesperson.

"Hyung-nim, what do you think?" (Reporter 1)

"How should I know? Don't talk to me. I need to make a call to the director..." (Reporter 2)

"It's plenty chaotic here without me talking to you... Ah!! He's here!!" (Reporter 1)

For a short length of time, a quiet stillness visited the noisy auditorium buzzing with anticipation. When the front door to the stage opened, the main character of today's gathering walked in, a

steady rhythm of his shoes hitting the ground echoing in the hall.

Kim Sae-Jin.

Carrying a mannerism and a facial expression of a man intimately familiar with the proceedings, Sae-Jin climbed up to the lectern and stared at the camera lenses.

At the same time, countless camera flashes went off, but he didn't even blink once. Seeing how relaxed he appeared, several women started blushing for some reason.

Just as the explosion of camera flashes lessened, Sae-Jin began speaking the issue at hand.

Initially, he presented a set of an easily-digestible data, designed to hopefully make the listeners place a bit more of their faith and trust in the seemingly-baseless words that were soon to follow. Things such as the density of Mana increasing drastically within the Monster field, as well as the increasing frequency of Boss-level Monsters being spotted around world, etc, etc.

"But what does all of that got to do with the Lycan?" (Reporter)

One of the reporters asked out aloud. Kim Sae-Jin lightly nodded his head once, and then, finally spoke out the contents of Kim Yu-Sohn's dream/vision, disguised as the Lycan's prediction.

The Republic of Korea as well as the world, turning into hell on earth after appearances of countless Boss-level Monsters – in this terrifying future, the devastated landscape had transformed into a playground of Monsters, and mankind were nothing more than snack for them.

When his presentation concluded, there was only silence remaining in the auditorium. What the Lycan had put forth was the 'end of the world'. Even if he was the one who correctly predicted the advent of Red Moon, this was still a difficult notion to accept.

"...Please, you need to believe him." (Sae-Jin)

All Sae-Jin could do now, was to say those words and leave the stage.

In reality, he had nothing left to say anyways. There was no more data compiled and no evidence to back up the claim, either.

The loud, roaring questions flew towards the departing Sae-Jin's back, but he didn't answer any one of them, simply choosing to exit the auditorium.

And later that day, the Korean peninsula exploded, figuratively speaking, of course.

*

Almost every TV station and internet forum tried to dissect Sae-Jin's press conference. Some of them treated him as a pure nutcase; others said that it was quite a reasonable, rational prediction based on reality.

However – all those opinions, criticisms and insults had to stop, a week after the conference.

That was because, on the safest location within the Monster field, and less than three months after the appearance of the Boss-level Monster bird, another Boss-level Monster called the Flesh Golem had made its unwelcome appearance there.

A creature crafted entirely by combining flesh of numerous Monsters and people; its might was dependent on the number of ingredients used, and as such, was quite a formidable Monster to deal with.

And this particular Golem was over 70 metres tall and 34 metres wide. In order to fill up such a huge body with flesh, viscera and bones, one would need at least a thousand creatures, so there was no need to mention how obscenely powerful this Monster was.

Instinctively knowing only to walk forward and destroy everything standing in its way, the Flesh Golem moved its gigantic feet and stomped its way across the Monster field and headed towards a heavily populated city.

"...The estimated time of its arrival is 20 minutes." (Kim Yu-Rin)

And naturally, the government and Knights hurriedly constructed a defense line to counter the threat.

Unfortunately for them, the Golem's speed was just too fast. Although almost 100 Knights with upper Mid Tier rank had gathered after the emergency callout orders were issued, they still lacked enough time to construct a proper line of defense.

"Can't we... receive the aid of the Hero Orcs again?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin cautiously asked her father, Kim Hyun-Seok. But he shook his head.

"Unlike the time with the Monster bird and the Red Moon, the route is too different. Understand that we are not going to receive their aid this time." (Kim Hyun-Seok)

This Golem's destination wasn't Seoul but Busan. The Monster was ignoring the Mid Tier hunting ground and was cutting straight through the coastline within the High Tier ground. And that was also the reason why the line of defense was set up by the coast of the East Sea.

"...Understood." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin let out a sigh and nodded her head.

Kkieeeck!!

Right then, cries of a Griffin could be heard from the sky. Thinking that Monsters were attacking, stunned Knights quickly looked up.

Thankfully, although it was indeed a Monster, it also wasn't an enemy. Mounted on the chest of the Griffin was the navy blue coloured crest of the Dawn Knights Order, and there was a Knight riding atop the flying creature.

It was the grand entrance of the famed 'Griffin Rider'. It was such a cool appearance, almost every Knight gathered here, even the upper Mid Tier ones, threw undisguised looks of envy.

"...Both of them are from the Dawn." (Kim Hyun-Seok)

Hearing her father's bitter mumbling, Kim Yu-Rin could only scratch the back of her neck. It was true about the old saying, that seeing the rise of a rival made one's stomach ache. No doubt, the Dawn Order would score big coverage worldwide, when the Boss raid proved to be successful and the resulting footage were broadcast to the public.

"Commander Kim Hyun-Seok, sir!!"

Soon after, Knights affiliated with the National Defense Force and tanks camouflaged in shades of green rolled up into the beach.

"What will be our plan of action here, sir?"

The man in charge of the military forces inquired hurriedly.

KKHUNG-KKHUNG-

As soon as those words left his mouth, the towering silhouette of the Flesh Golem could be seen in the distance, and the unsettling tremor from each stride it took could be felt underfoot as well.

"Firstly, lure the Monster onto the beach. Tanks will fire at the enemy once and retreat. They will only get in the way." (Kim Hyun-Seok)

Kim Hyun-Seok laid down the order as he unsheathed the powerful sword 'Gram' that shone as brilliantly as the sun itself. Subordinate Knights nodded their heads and dispersed quickly.

"Is this your first battle with that sword, Master?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin too unsheathed her sword and asked.

"It is indeed so. However... I see that your sword is damaged slightly."

"...Oh. Uh, yes, but as long as my Mana can easily enter it, it's sufficiently good for me."

"Ask him for a favour." (Kim Hyun-Seok)

"Pardon?"

Kim Hyun-Seok used his sword to lightly tap hers and smiled.

"It may be a Branded Goods, but it's already 30 years old now. It's time to change it. Aren't you a friend with Kim Sae-Jin?" (Kim Hyun-Seok)

"Ah... But, still..."

"Take a good look at my sword. See how brilliantly clear its shine is?"

""

Was he trying to show off, even under this type of a situation? Kim Yu-Rin took a quick glance at her father and pouted deeply.

Regretfully, though – there wasn't a lot of time left for her to carry that pout around.

KKHUNG!! KKHUNG!!

The tremor became louder and harsher. And on the blurry silhouette of the gigantic Monster, a pair of blood-red eyeballs could be seen now.

SFX for whirling noise

On the cannons of the tanks, Mana began gathering like a whirlpool. Their aim was to intercept the Golem's relentless march.

At the same time, Every Knight present roused their Mana up – on their bodies, Mana Barriers strengthening their bodies and defenses, and on their weapons, auras matching the shapes of the various weapons they carried.

And so, the deadly battle began proper.

'A fierce battle will unfold on a beach nearby.'

As soon as Sae-Jin heard of the news, he thought this was the perfect opportunity to truly gauge the Leviathan Form's depth of power.

And also, maybe because it was a surprisingly docile creature that didn't take action unless its territory was breached, the threat of his ego being overtaken had not occurred once yet. Honestly, even with Athany Form having grown to such a size, he still hadn't encountered the threat of it encroaching on his consciousness at all.

He quickly crossed the Monster field in the Lycanthrope's appearance and quickly dived into the East Sea, transforming into the baby Leviathan. And while riding on the rough waves, he rapidly swam towards the site of the battle.

"...Wow, this body has gotten bigger now. Even the scales have changed colour."

The size had grown to a point where it could at least rival the height of a middle schooler, while the previously-white scales had taken on a tinge of azure. When he looked at his own reflection on the water, the jaws seemed to have begun resembling a Leviathan a little bit more, in the way it protruded out slightly. Even the fangs seemed to have gotten sharper as well.

'As expected, staying in water makes the growth of this Form to accelerate.'

He caressed the undulating ocean waves and began to enjoy the impromptu bit of surfing.

*

When he arrived on the scene, he witnessed one hell of a fight unfolding over there.

No one could tell just where such an abomination came from, but regardless, it had to be acknowledged that the Flesh Golem was indeed a Chimera-like creature of marvel.

Kim Sae-Jin observed the battlefield from afar. Seeing the sword auras rising from 100 plus Knights over yonder, he could tell for sure that each and every one of them were people with unrivalled status.

But then, the Flesh Golem proved to be a difficult opponent as well.

Monsters fell from the giant Golems body – they were its clones, each of them carrying battle strength exceeding that of a regular Mid Tier Knight. On top of this, quite unlike the image it presented with its massive body, the Golem itself attacked with precisely controlled magic at the Wizards who were lending assistance towards the battle up front.

Sae-Jin fell into a dilemma, wondering what he should do next. He couldn't dare to use his 'Breath' in fear of hitting those Knights near the Golem, but to sit here and do nothing was just....

But soon enough, he came up with an idea.

Almost nothing was known about how the Leviathan of the legends attacked. People only knew that it could fire off a Breath, just like a dragon. But Sae-Jin thought it would be a regretful waste if he only relied on Breath, when he had a Skill that allowed him to manipulate the Element of Mana and water itself, affording him near-endless possibilities.

"...I wonder, can I do it?"

For now, Sae-Jin fired a stream of water towards the Flesh Golem.

It was to 'understand' the make-up of the Golem using the Leviathan's innate Trait.

The stream of water entered the Golem's flesh, before exiting

shortly after and flew back, landing on his scales.

That was the end of the reconnaissance. Although he didn't have any 'correct' material to build himself a Flesh Golem, he still understood how to make a Golem.

And so, he began pouring his will into the ocean current. As soon as he did that, the water rose up as if a giant mountain was about to break out of its surface, and then...

A gigantic blue Golem twice the size of the Flesh Golem revealed itself to the world.

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" ... "
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Immediately, heavy silence descended on the battlefield.

Not only the Knights, even the Flesh Golem too, stopped what they were doing and stared.

One would be hard pressed to find a situation where the words "absolutely overwhelming" be more apt than this very moment.

Its massive and impressive body reminded everyone witnessing it of the Titans from the folklores, and from those two blue 'eyes' looking down on the battlefield, an indescribable pressure emanated out, causing everyone to feel suffocated.

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"That is.... Oh, f*ck your mama." (Unnamed Knight)
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Not only one, but now there were two.

Was this the entrance of yet another Boss Monster? Several Knights were about fall down in utter despair, when...

WUOOOOONG

The Titan of the ocean swung its huge fist.

Knights hurriedly escaped from the vicinity, and almost right away, an incredible shock wave exploded out and seemingly swallowed up the whole world. Everyone's view was blocked by the torrents of sand and water drops crazily whirling around in the air. Even the branches of vegetation on the distant mountains broke off from the tremendous impact.

"Listen up, take care of the injur..."

But when the dirty cloud of dust began settling down and their view became clearer – Knights couldn't help but fall into another bout of stunned confusion. No, it was more like their brains ceased functioning altogether. They just stood there, staring.

The huge fist of the Titan was currently pushing down on the head of the Flesh Golem and not the Knights.

"...What the hell is going on?!"

One of the Knights dazedly muttered, giving voice to the very thought everyone else was having at that moment.

< 32. King of the Infinite Ocean, Leviathan (1) > Fin.

Chapter 110: King of the Infinite Ocean, Leviathan (2)

Kkwahang!!

A destructive shock wave shook the earth, and the Titan's massive fist squashed the head of the Flesh Golem.

SFX for a low growl

As if it got stunned by the sudden attack from what it thought was a fellow Monster, the Flesh Golem let out a strange low-frequency groan and retreated a little.

Too bad, the blue Titan didn't give a rat's ass and threw yet another massive punch, this time aimed at the Golem's chest. Quite unlike the huge bulk that blocked out the sky, its movement was rather stylish to behold.

KKHUOOOONG!!!!!

The Flesh Golem crossed its arm to block the incoming attack, but still suffered a grievous injury, one of its arms separating from the body. Angered by the immense pain, the Golem let out a roar half filled with rage and the other half with agony, and dashed towards the blue Titan.

Now that it lost pretty much all its reasoning, it no longer displayed that deft application of magic and clones anymore. It just went for the midriff of the Titan and tackled it to the ground.

SPLASH!!!

Falling into the East Sea, the Flesh Golem struggled in the water, but still swung its fist at the Titan. But well, the shift into a new battle ground presented a big problem for the Monster.

The 'fuel' for the Leviathan's Titan was water of the ocean. In other words, it would never be defeated as long as it was in a body of water.

SFX for expansive swings of a large fist

The Flesh Golem's violent punches constantly landed on the body of its target, but the blue Titan didn't even try to defend itself. No, it simply counterattacked while letting the hits in.

From the apocalyptic throwdown of two giant Monsters, sparks of Mana flew away like shooting stars.

The battle slowly tilted towards the blue Titan's favour as time passed. The flesh of the Flesh Golem continuously fell off, yet the Titan's wounds were recovering constantly by all that sea water surrounding it.

'I'm getting dizzy here.'

However, there was that thing about Mana of the summoner who brought forth the Titan, Kim Sae-Jin, constantly decreasing at an alarming rate. Thankfully, though – the Leviathan Form possessed a Mana reserve tens of times larger than his regular 'human' appearance, so he wasn't too worried about that for now.

Kkwahang!!

Pher-uhng!!

Following a large and disturbing sound of explosion coming from the punches of two Giants landing successfully, a piece of flesh stripped off the Flesh Golem and caused large ripples of water to splash all around.

None of the Knights witnessing this by the beach dared to intrude upon this battle; meanwhile, drones belonging to Knights Orders and media corporations buzzed away in the air, redirecting their camera lenses towards the giants.

Kkhuong! Kkhwang! Kkhuong! Kkwang!

Although most of the drones had their wings and lenses damaged by the massive shock waves generated by the relentless and chaotic battle for supremacy happening right before them, a few still managed to endure and capture the resulting footage.

"What the hell is going on here...?"

"D**n... Am I dreaming or something?"

Knights stared dazedly at this unexplainable situation for the next three minutes, before finally realising why they were there in the first place, which helped them regain their focus. Regardless of what was happening, that blue Titan was their ally. So, it made sense to work together and destroy that grotesque Golem...

"Everyone, charge!!"

Kim Hyun-Seok cried out and dashed forward.

SFX for energy-something-something shooting out

From his sword Gram, a powerful fireball shot out and inflicted a deep wound on the Flesh Golem's arm. The Golem roared at the top of its lungs in unbridled rage, but the Titan didn't miss its chance and thrust forward its massive blue fist into the Golem's open mouth.

KKWAJEEK!!!!

The fist connected so splendidly, the Golem's mouth almost came loose.

Towards the tottering Flesh Golem, countless Knights rushed in and swung their weapons. Sharp, focused Mana encased each and every one of those weapons, creating different silhouettes of weapon auras as the Golem's body gradually became the proverbial Swiss cheese....

SFX for a painful moan of a Monster

Thanks to the unexpected alliance of the blue Titan and the Knights, the Flesh Golem issued a sorrowful wail as it crumbled into a heap of disgusting pieces. However, although this battle had come to an end, Knights couldn't really relax at all. Would this

Titan now turn its unwelcome attention towards them and attack?

Well, such a worry proved to be a needless worry. The blue Titan dissolved into several streams of water and disappeared into the sea altogether.

And when the Titan suddenly vanished, Knights quickly followed the strands of Mana leaving from the 'remains' of the Titan.

And sure enough, on the surface of the undulating sea over yonder, there was a single creature.

Its entire body was covered in pale azure scales, and its eyes were unfathomably deep as if to demonstrate its intelligence.

Unlike its adorable countenance, the aura this mysterious creature exuded was undeniably noble – so much so, it proved impossible to stick whatever careless adjective one could think of to this being.

"What is that?"

Knights murmured to themselves and carefully studied its appearance. But, as if it was feeling shy from all the attention pouring on it, it immediately dived under the water's surface and disappeared from the view.

"...The battle has ended. Mop up the remains of the Golem."

It was then, Kim Hyun-Seok's energetic voice resounded. Pretty much every Knight here was pooped out from fatigue, but still had to move their weary bodies since the superior officer issued an order.

The subjugation of the Flesh Golem unexpectedly ended with very low casualties.

And the footage containing the very reason for that – the handiwork of the Leviathan – spread out like wildfire the following day. However, since no one really knew about how the baby

version of Leviathan looked like, the world took to calling it the 'Unidentified Lifeform' and emphasized the fact that it played the crucial role in defeating the Flesh Golem.

Of course....

"Judging from those shiny scales and deep, clear eyes, it could very well be a Leviathan."

...There were a few experts who posited as so.

Unfortunately, these experts were actually scholars focusing on the field of history and folklore, so 'real' experts related to all things Monsters summarily laughed them out of the room, berating them for their baseless assumptions.

The Leviathan was the world's laziest – and because of that, relatively safe – beast of legends. Plus, its normal territory was located in deep oceans, so it was argued that there was no way it would roam around the coastline of the East Sea.

"Could it be a Divine Beast?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

And currently, the armchair expert operating out of Kim Sae-Jin's home, Yu Sae-Jung, took a look at this and that on the Dawn's official forum using her phone before spinning out her own interesting theory.

"Mm?"

"I'm saying, a Divine Beast. Remember that Black Turtle living near China not too long ago? And people keep saying that the Azure Dragon and the Leviathan have broadly similar set of abilities, the only difference being their names, you know."

"...So you're saying this creature is THE Azure Dragon of the East?"

Dumbfounded, Sae-Jin pointed towards the face of the baby Leviathan, which kind of resembled a puppy no matter how one cut it. Right up until then, even he was impressed by how cute it looked in the photo.

"Yep. But I'm not the only one with that opinion right now. A few Dawn Order Knights are thinking like this already."

"...Gimme that. Let me see." (Sae-Jin)

Yu Sae-Jung was telling the truth. The Dawn's official forum was filled with 'Azure Dragon' this and 'Azure Dragon' that. He thought that the Dawn was filled with best of the best, but now... Now, he realised they too possessed capacity to spout unfounded rubbish.

"See? What did I tell you? But still, it feels like all these huge things happen only in Korea lately. There are the Hero Orcs on land, and in the sea, we got a bona fide Azure Dragon now... Ah!! Right, right!! Look, the Azure Dragon supposedly guards the eastern direction, right? The East Sea is to the east..." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"It's not like that, so you can tell them to stop with this nonsense."

"...What the?! How does Oppa know that for sure?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

" "

Since he couldn't say "It's me, so I'm pretty sure about it", Sae-Jin just let out a fake cough and gave the phone back to her.

But when Yu Sae-Jung got her phone back, she quickly studied his mood for a bit, before asking him in an obviously manufactured leisure.

"...Op, Oppa should give me your phone too."

"Mine? Why?"

"Ju, just give it to me. Oppa also took mine just now, so this is fair."

••••

Although her logic didn't quite sound right, Sae-Jin didn't argue and gave her his phone. She quickly snatched it off his hands, and as if afraid of having her activity seen, she brought the phone right in front of her eyes and hurriedly moved her fingers.

And about three minutes passed like that. After confirming that he hadn't made any suspicious contact with Hazeline, she let out a relieved sigh, chucked the phone on top of the dining room table and dived into his arms.

"Oppa always grumbles like an old man, but still ends up doing everything I ask of you~."

"...What are you talking about?"

"No, well... It's nothing, really."

She spoke hard to understand words while unbuttoning Sae-Jin's shirt.

*

Exactly one week passed since the subjugation. And the situation became exactly as Yu Sae-Jung had predicted.

The baby Leviathan had morphed into the baby Azure Dragon of the East instead, and the 'world' raised a huge fuss, saying that the Azure Dragon would become the guardian of the East Sea.

Hell, even the government got suckered into this popular opinion and believed it. They were currently in the middle of combing the entirety of the East Sea for the evidence of this baby Dragon that would no doubt become a huge asset to the national security in the future.

"How are you handling Rahaimde so far?"

Ignoring all these chaos, Kim Sae-Jin went to visit Kim Yu-Sohn. The veteran mercenary's complexion had become a lot worse than before.

"We're taking a good care of him... Kehuem. The ploy of using

special pharmaceuticals to control him is also progressing favourably as well... It won't be long before we are able to extract all the information we need. But besides all that..."

Kim Yu-Sohn tapped the top of his desk, and a hologram projection rose up. And in this projection, a web page of a Cafe named 'The Deity of Four Directions, Azure Dragon'.

"...What will you do about this, sir?" (Kim Yu-Sohn)

"Ah, this, well... uh..." (Sae-Jin)

"In my opinion, I think this is a good development, sir."

Before Sae-Jin could finish, Kim Yu-Sohn stepped in the middle.

"This is good?" (Sae-Jin)

"Yes, sir. Without a doubt, the frequency of Boss Monsters appearing will only increase from now on – but if there is a being that can give rise to hope to our allies and instill despair in the hearts of the enemies, then that's all for the better, I believe. More importantly, as a Leviathan, you can easily fight against any Bosslevel Monsters alone, so you will become a great pillar of strength for this world."

66 25

Kim Sae-Jin wordlessly scratched the back of his neck after seeing how ardent and fervent Kim Yu-Sohn seemed to appear. After all, wasn't this... like a formation of a Suicide Squad to keep the end of the world at bay or something?

"Ah, well, that..." (Sae-Jin)

"Also, truth be told, it was my idea to create this Cafe. Of course, if you, the Guild Master, wishes it, I will reveal to the world that it's not an Azure Dragon but a Leviathan, instead."

"Huh?! No, wait, but why..." (Sae-Jin)

At this sudden confession, Sae-Jin's eyes went extra round.

"Your abilities are indeed truly an incredible thing, Guild Master. The Leviathan is a Monster that possesses divinity, and so, if you can continue to appear as one and learn to utilise its powers in full, then this old man will not have any more wishes left."

The eyes of the strangely urgent Kim Yu-Sohn were not only filled with his desperation, but streams of blood as well. Kim Sae-Jin couldn't say I can't do it to the face of a man who looked like he might vomit blood any time now.

"...Yes. Well, uh... My parents seemed to have been fighting them, so... I should do the same, too. But forget about that for a second, and please drink this. There is blood pooling in your eyes."

Sae-Jin reluctantly replied and handed a potion over to Kim Yu-Sohn. It was a high grade potion that one couldn't even buy in the market even if one wanted to.

"Huhuhuh... Thank you."

Kim Yu-Sohn made a somewhat relieved and leisurely smile as he received the potion.

After finishing up the meeting with Kim Yu-Sohn, Sae-Jin headed to the Guild's training facility as usual to train, only to find an unexpected guest waiting for him there.

"Ah, you finally came, Mister Kim Sae-Jin."

It was Kim Yu-Rin. She was smiling at him while carrying various items on both of her hands.

"What are all those?" (Sae-Jin)

"It felt wrong to come with empty hands so I brought along some stuff." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"....You mean, all of them?"

"Yes. It's nothing much. It's just some electronic items, a wrist watch, and a wallet, and..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Sae-Jin tilted his head slightly, but he still took the gift packages and placed them down on the table in the lounge.

"But, why did you go to all this trouble, Miss Yu-Rin? Is there a favour you'd like to ask me for?"

"Ah? Oh, uh... a favour, you say... I don't particularly have one, but... the thing is..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

She began contorting her face to form an unnatural smile while slightly shaking her hips.

....Why is she trying to dance provocatively all of a sudden?!

Sae-Jin's face reddened slightly, before belatedly spotting a sword tied to her hips. She didn't have a scabbard to hide it, and even with a single glance, he could tell that it was chipped pretty noticeably and didn't look all that threatening anymore.

"Looks like your weapon's durability has fallen greatly?" (Sae-Jin)

"Ah... You think so? Ah!! But what happened to my scabbard?!"

Although her acting needed a lot of work, Sae-Jin did find her attempt quite funny, so he grinned slightly and opened his mouth.

"There's no need to beat around the bush, Miss Yu-Rin. I'll help you. I'll even give you a discount as well."

"R, really? In that case, I..."

"4.5 million dollars. Of course, you don't have to worry about its resulting quality. I'll definitely craft a weapon that'll rank in the top 3 of the Branded Goods rankings." (Sae-Jin)

"...Fou, four point five..."

Watching Kim Yu-Rin's face gradually lose colour, Sae-Jin couldn't hold it and began chuckling out loudly.

"Yes. I can't go any lower than that, I'm afraid." (Sae-Jin)

"Ah, yes. I, I also am p, p, prepared, as well."

Kim Yu-Rin swallowed her saliva noisily and nodded her head.

Actually, though, her real reason for this visit wasn't just about her weapon. There was something else far more important. Something she just had to find out. She even spent one whole night staying up, researching and worrying about this thing....

"By the way... Mister Sae-Jin, besides all that..."

At her voice suddenly becoming razor-sharp, Sae-Jin's shoulders trembled slightly.

"Yes?"

"Would you... like to spar with me for a little bit?"

< 32. King of the Infinite Ocean, Leviathan (2) > Fin.

Chapter 111: King of the Infinite Ocean, Leviathan (3)

"A spar? Why, all of a sudden..." (Sae-Jin)

Kim Sae-Jin backpedalled. However, Kim Yu-Rin took a quick step forward and got closer to him.

"Although I did give you my assessment before, I've never really fought you with my utmost yet." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"I, uh..."

"Eiii, don't be like that and let's do this thing once and for all." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Sae-Jin took a quick glance at the clock. It hadn't even been ten minutes since he arrived at the training facility, and on top of that, he was decked out in training suit as well so, to go home now was just a bit...

"C'mon now, let's do this~." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin showed off aegyo which was quite unlike her, while she dragged the helpless Sae-Jinto the middle of the training facility.

While still carrying an unsure expression, Sae-Jin went to pick the practice sword, but Kim Yu-Rin shook her head in disapproval and handed him a mace, instead.

"Look, here's a mace you can use. You wielded it so well back then." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Huh?"

Still carrying that smile of hers, she forcibly squeezed the mace into his hands.

"...." (Sae-Jin)

He looked at the mace and fell into a thought.

Kim Yu-Rin was definitely suspecting something. Every single action he takes from here on could flame her suspicions even more...

Before he could organise his thoughts properly, Kim Yu-Rin approached him like a bolt of lightning and swung her sword down. She didn't load the weapon with Mana, but the power and accuracy displayed were still incredible, so Sae-Jin had to put all his effort to swing the mace and defend himself.

That sudden burst signaled the beginning of the duel between a mace and a sword.

*

Sae-Jin put just over a half of what he was really capable of during this sparring session. But it proved impossible to completely mask all those little habits that his body had accumulated over time, and now, Kim Yu-Rin was sitting on a chair, seriously pondering about something while her frown deepened further.

"Fuu-oo..."

She spat out a sigh. Truly, she felt that there were parts that resembled the Hero Orc. Definitely so...

Did that mean Kim Sae-Jin studied under the Hero Orc? Well, he did say something about him being friendly with a subordinate of the Orc. But remembering back to those times when she went to the Orc village, she couldn't recall ever seeing any traces of him there...

'Maybe?'

She looked at Sae-Jin who was stretching his limbs at that moment. Monsters that could change into humans were very rare, but they existed fore sure. Called the 'Monster Man', she even personally hunted one before.

But Kim Sae-Jin definitely wasn't like that. Looking at his

history, no one could argue that he was a Monster in disguise.

In that case... maybe, it was the opposite? In other words, 'a human that could change into a Monster'... And, there was certainly one ability blessed onto the human race that could make such a thing plausible – the 'Trait'.

"Mister Kim Sae-Jin?"

Kim Yu-Rin cautiously called out to him.

"Yes?" (Sae-Jin)

"Uhm, if it's not too much trouble... can I ask what your Trait is?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"My Trait?"

"Ah, well... Yes. But if you feel uncomfortable talking about, then you don't have to tell me." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Really? In that case, I won't tell you. It's a taboo, after all." (Sae-Jin)

Kim Sae-Jin made his displeasure known and bounced out of the training facility in hurried steps.

"Eh...?"

Kim Yu-Rin stared at his back in a dumbfounded daze.

*

Chilly winds were blowing now, and some regions had already welcomed early signs of snow with warm smiles. The sights of people walking around wearing thick padding could be seen, and stores selling scarfs and gloves increased in numbers.

The arrival of a new season seemed to possess the power to bring forth such changes to the scenery.

"I hear that Portugal is on the brink... Won't the world really come to end at this rate?"

"Eiii, c'mon now."

The conversations taking place on the streets were fused with the seasonal Wintery chill. Just over a month had passed since that earth-shaking press conference, and chaos had truly visited the world.

The total number of Monsters were increasing explosively, and Boss-level Monsters constantly popped up. As if the Monster bird incident of Korea was just the beginning, stronger and scarier Monsters turned the world upside down.

The situation had worsened so much, it became no longer possible to maintain a functioning government in regions that fell behind in terms of forming an acceptable defense against Monster threats as well on the development of Knights Orders – regions such as Southeast Asia and the continent of Africa. This triggered an unprecedented refugee crisis and thus became another big worldwide issue.

However, from that incident with the Monster bird, and to the recent Flesh Golem, the Republic of Korea suffered little damage to itself while it fought off those threats when compared to other nations.

And one of the reasons for this was, unlike others, all because of a certain mysterious supernatural force.

The Leviathan. A being that the world took to calling as the Azure Dragon.

"...But something is strange." (Sae-Jin)

Kim Sae-Jin quietly muttered to himself as he read the words off the pages of 'A Deity of Four Directions, Azure Dragon'. Quite different from the name that sounded like a swindler's operation, the website itself was thoroughly well designed and laid out.

The Azure Dragon-related notifications, open forums, noticeboards, etc. The simple but luxuriously decorated site didn't have much traffic, but at the same time, it seemed that there

were a few dedicated individuals keeping things going steadily as well.

"It's like the site is in a sleep mode, but still, the Azure Dragon is fast becoming the guardian entity of the Korean peninsula." (Kim Sun-Ho)

Kim Sun-Ho replied with an energetic voice. Sae-Jin came to see Kim Yu-Sohn, but the illness of the old man had flared up and so, he was having a meeting with his son, Sun-Ho, instead.

"Okay, fine. But... just how are you planning to utilise this Cafe?" (Sae-Jin)

"Ah, about that. So, I've got this idea – how about we do it like this, sir? There is this old movie called the 'Spider-M*n', you see, and in it, it uses roughly the same idea as mine..."

Kim Sun-Ho continued with his words in a somewhat happy voice.

His suggestion was rather simple.

The owners of the website were Kim Sun-Ho, Kim Sae-Jin and Kim Yu-Sohn. And among them, Sae-Jin was the Leviathan. And so... Sae-Jin would 'inform' them of the next place where the Leviathan was going to appear, and that info would pop up on this website. (TL: There was a thing like that in Spider-Man movies? Hmm...)

Through this method, which implied that this website was in some sort of communication with the Azure Dragon, it would earn a huge amount of fame and people's trust. And they would be able to instil the idea of the Leviathan – or in this case, the Azure Dragon – being the ally of humanity.

"...However, when looking at the big picture, isn't that fraud?" (Sae-Jin)

"Pardon? Well, that, uh, well.... No, it likely isn't. It'll probably be okay, as long as we are not found out, Guild Master." (Kim SunHo)

This whole thing about not getting found out didn't sound kosher, so Sae-Jin narrowed his eyes and glared at Kim Sun-Ho.

"W, well, if such a thing is a fraud, then, uh, acting as the Lycan, the Guild Master would end up serving multiple life senten... Oh. Sorry." (Kim Sun-Ho)

Kim Sun-Ho hurriedly tried to come up with an excuse, before lowering his head and scratched the back of his neck.

Sae-Jin looked at him and chuckled slightly. Although Kim Sun-Ho seemed to be scared of his boss in the beginning, it was as if he had gotten a lot more comfortable now and his attitude had lightened up. Sae-Jin preferred this, as it was like dealing with a friend.

Also, Sae-Jin didn't expect to see the father of a child to be so immature as well, either.

"Anyhow. I've already uploaded the coordinates where you will be for today. Of course, no one will believe us now, but I already called up a friendly news network, so... I'm pretty certain that they will send someone over." (Kim Sun-Ho)

Sae-Jin nodded his head. But then, Kim Sun-Ho's expression hardened suddenly.

"Ah, also, it seems like that Bathory woman is showing signs of movement, Master." (Kim Sun-Ho)

"...She is?"

"Yes sir. Not sure what's gotten into her, but for someone who doesn't want to breathe the same air as humans, she's been seen walking around the outside quite a lot lately. But what's odd about her behaviour is... that she's been seen wandering around the coastline. Looks like she is thinking about the Azure Dragon, Guild Master."

"In that case... if I'm lucky, I might get to meet her, then?" (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin's eyes shone brightly. As long as Leviathan was not on solid ground, it was basically invincible within the ocean. After all, the ocean was like an infinite source of Mana to him.

"...No, Guild Master, if you are 'unlucky', then you'll get to meet her."

However, Kim Sun-Ho's rebuttal was rather blunt.

"What do you mean?"

"It's still too difficult against the Bathory woman, sir. She alone brutally slaughtered dozens of Highest Tier Knights back when the war between races was still a thing. Even with the Leviathan Form, as a baby, you're asking for the impossible." (Kim Sun-Ho)

"...She's that powerful?"

Currently, his Leviathan Form was strong enough to fight against the Flesh Golem, albeit by using a special technique. But even that was not enough to stand up against this Bathory woman?

"That's correct, sir. The descendants of the Bathory family enjoy this unique Trait passed down genetically where, by paying the price of fellow Vampires' lives, they become much more powerful than before. Not sure how that works, but well, that weird story about 'Bathory bathing in blood'? That story came about because of this Trait, sir."

Kim Sae-Jin understood then.

Back then, the number of Vampires who died during the war between the races easily went past a hundred thousand worldwide.

After ending the meeting with Kim Sun-Ho, Sae-Jin changed into the Leviathan and swam in the East Sea.

Currently, even at a casual glance, his length and weight had

blown up at a crazy rate. He only swam in the East Sea three times a week, but still... It seemed that his growth accelerated due to him using this Form's abilities rather vigorously of late.

Most importantly, though – he still hadn't felt the dangers of his ego being overtaken by the creature's instincts, not like with the Orc or the Lycanthrope.

This led to Sae-Jin questioning the veracity of the widely understood "nature" of the Leviathan that people accepted as fact. He even thought that maybe, this powerful creature of the ocean wasn't a Monster, but a being sitting on a higher plain of existence than mere humans.

They said the Leviathan would turn violent when its territory was breached, but.... well, wouldn't humans do the same too, under the circumstances? There was no creature alive that allowed others to freely break into their homes, after all.

"There it is!!"

Hearing the voices coming from afar, Sae-Jin quickly assumed a serious facial expression and corrected his posture. The appearance of a baby Leviathan being pushed around by the waves had suddenly transformed into an omnipotent deity.

"Be quiet. Carefully take its photos. Easy, easy."

The camera lens pointing towards him was located on top of a yacht. In other words, there was a boat carrying people in this dangerous part of the East Sea. If it was in the past, this would've never happened in a million years – they probably had to cross areas filled with sea Monsters to get here.

"Well, everyone. There it is, the Azure Dragon. Looks like it has grown in size a little, but it still exudes that noble and unwavering aura..."

A reporter whispered to the other passengers. Sae-Jin glanced at the label stuck on the camera. They were from the station KNS – a

friendly broadcaster, the one Kim Yu-Sohn secretly gave a headsup to, as a thank you for all the favourable articles written about The Monster Guild.

"Now, the East Sea trade route has been stabilised thanks to the influence of the Azure Dragon. All the regular sea Monsters as well as the flying Monsters previously found near here are busy migrating away from the East Sea, after being thoroughly suppressed by the Dragon's presence. Right now, the economic value added to the country because of the Azure Dragon cleaning up this region has been calculated to easily exceed \$1 billion..."

Of course, not all ocean-bound Monsters ran away. Every now and then, an aggressive sea Monster did appear and challenged him.

...Just like now.

"Eu-hurk!!"

The yacht began swaying uncontrollably as the heavy waves rose up all of a sudden. At the same time, darkness seemed to descend on the world, and a Monster revealed its ugly mug from under the water's surface.

Red eyes and horrifying fangs jutting out from its maws – it was a Monster called 'Ness', the dominant creature of this area, before the Leviathan showed up. (TL: Korea is pretty far from Scotland, so not sure how the Loch Ness Monster has ended up there, but this is a work of fiction, so anything goes, I guess...)

"That, that, that...." (Someone from the yacht)

As expected, it became a state of full-on panic on the yacht. The escort Knights belatedly unsheathed their weapons, but everyone knew very well that no Knight could defeat a sea Monster when on the sea. The reporter looked at the Leviathan with a pair of pleading eyes.

"...Keuheung."

Kim Sae-Jin the baby Leviathan snorted dismissively, and slowly moved his body. The Ness Monster growled and expelled Mana in a threatening manner, but well, it was all kind of laughable, really.

He was planning to use his Breath and easily blow the creature away, but then, he thought about the camera. It was true that one wanted to show off a bit if there was an appreciative audience watching the action.

He thought for a bit on what he should do, before a good idea popped in his brain. He then quickly poured his Mana into the ocean.

SFX for a sudden gust of heavy winds

Violent winds suddenly whipped up like a thunderstorm and shook the sky, and on the body of water where the Ness was swimming, the ocean began to split open. And after all that mass of water parted away as if a world of vacuum had formed there, the previously-hidden main body of the Ness was dramatically revealed to the world.

Unfortunately for the Monster, the sea water was basically its life. The Ness desperately pedalled its limbs in the air where there was not a drop of water as it began drying up from the tip of its tail, until finally, even the red light circulating in its eyes dissipated away.

This should be enough, then.

Kim Sae-Jin returned the violent storm of winds and the massively-split ocean back to their original calm state, and then took a quick glance at the yacht. Even while experiencing events exceeding his wildest imaginations, the cameraman showed off his true professionalism and continued to film everything away.

"Uh...."

Inside the minds of these folks, who were all dazedly staring at the baby 'Azure Dragon', this creature had become even more wondrous to behold.

To split open the sea like that... they had read that before – but, that was from the Bible. And more importantly, the one who performed that miracle was the omnipotent 'God'.

"

Sae-Jin took one more glance at the dazed group of people, before diving deep into the water. He was going to absorb the Ness's Mana Crystal.

[Overall Growth: 10% achieved]

- Acquired the Skill 'Ness's Evil Eye'. Lifeforms coming in contact with the Sea Monster's glare will be unable to move for a short period of time. Divine Creatures will be unaffected by this Skill.
 - This Skill can only be used during the Sea Monster Form.

Although it was an alert window he hadn't seen in a long while, rather than feeling happy, Sae-Jin found himself utterly stunned at its contents.

"...This is only 10%?!"

To think that such an overwhelming strength was only 10% of its true might... Sae-Jin couldn't help but praise the greatness of the Leviathan.

< 32. King of the Infinite Ocean, Leviathan (3) > Fin.

Chapter 112: King of the Infinite Ocean, Leviathan (4)

A certain video footage was being played inside the editing suite of a media company called "Guk-Nyeom Daily".

In it, one could see an Azure Dragon yawning and stretching its limbs while floating on top of the ocean surface when, all of a sudden, the sea Monster 'Ness' made its entrance.

It was one of East Sea's most infamous Monsters. Facing the provocation of this Ness, Azure Dragon began radiating charm filled with wondrous leisure outward.

And when the adorable Azure Dragon opened its eyes wide open and glared, the sea containing the Ness split completely apart, just like how Moses split the Red Sea.

In the end, Ness couldn't even do anything and died a death of drying up like a jerky and then, the Azure Dragon triumphantly dived under the water's surface.

"...Holy cow. This is some serious sh*t. PD Kim, how the hell did you capture this footage?!"

Thanks to the power of this massive, exclusive scoop, even the Chief Director of the Guk-Nyeom Daily, Park Jung-Hyuk, had to make his way to the editing suite. Maintaining a slim smile, PD Kim Hyun-Jeh did his best to rein in his overflowing pride and tried to appear as humble as possible.

"We had received a call from the Monster Mercenary Company. A notice of the Azure Dragon's potential appearance had popped up in a website called 'A Deity of Four Directions, Azure Dragon' and they wanted us to verify the veracity of that claim."

"Heum... To verify, huh?"

"Yes, sir. I also thought it could be nothing more than some

swindlers trying their luck, but since the Mercenary Company made the request, I had no choice but to check it out."

Chief Director Park scratched his chin as he thought about something. If that Mercenary Company suddenly asked one of his men to verify the claims of a fishy-sounding website, then that could only mean... Well, they were doing things in a sort of 'roundabout way'.

"Okay, so who is the owner of that website? Don't tell me, it's also Mister Kim Sae-Jin?"

Director Park said as he began typing on the keyboard. On the screen of the editing room's computer, that video footage was replaced by the website 'A Deity of Four Directions, Azure Dragon'.

"They were denying it, but... I think it's quite likely. I mean, Kim Sae-Jin did say he could communicate with Monsters. And coincidentally, the ones to tip us off was the Monster Mercenary too, so..."

"Is that right? In that case... For now, keep everything to yourself. Our station has been surviving thanks to Mister Kim Sae-Jin, so don't you dare f*ck this one up."

'Guk-Nyeom Daily' was a big multi-media conglomerate that also owned the station 'KNS', but the truth was, it had been lagging behind their rivals due to experiencing numerous hardships and headwinds in the past.

However, from a certain point in time, things changed – beginning with The Monster Guild revealing important information through Guk-Nyeom only. And they even made an entertainment show which didn't seem all that promising on paper with Yu Sae-Jung, Joo Ji-Hyuk, Yi Hye-Rin as well as other famous members of the Guild. And now, they had become so intimate, that some were openly wondering if The Monster had acquired the media outlet or not.

And that led to the prestige of 'Guk-Nyeom' to naturally soar at a remarkable rate. At minimum, they no longer heard these damnable words: "KNS? Ah... Apologies, you guys are a bit..." from the agents of Knights and celebrities. No, in the case with Knights, their eyes gleamed dangerously as they actively tried to jump in with both their feet. After all, there was this shining backer called The Monster behind Guk-Nyeom now.

Director Park closed his eyes and began comparing the turbulent, difficult past and the good times of now, falling deeply into a state of pride at how things had turned out.

"Ah, by the way, PD Kim."

Then, suddenly, he began glaring at PD Kim.

"Y, yes?"

"You are being rude, saying Kim Sae-Jin this and Kim Sae-Jin that. You better address him with a ssi at the end... No, you start calling him with a nim attached, understand? It's now Kim Sae-Jin-nim. Got that? Even if he's not around, you use the honorific. If you don't, you might end up having a slip of a tongue during an interview or something."

It seemed that 'Kim Sae-Jin' had already become a religion for Director Park.

".....Ah. Yes, sir."

PD Kim scratched the back of his neck and replied in a reluctant manner.

"Repeat after me. Kim Sae-Jin-nim, Kim Sae-Jin-nim, Kim Sae-Jin-nim..."

*

In the middle of the winter.

For the purpose of going out on a date, Sae-Jin brought Yu Sae-Jung along to the Monster Mercenary Company HQ.

Numerous modifications, new additions and repair works must have had some contributions here, because the Mercenary Company building not only failed to resemble a garden shed constructed out of plywood, it instead looked far more pristine, imposing, and impressive than a regular Knights Order's HQ.

As expected of the world's best Mercenary Company. As an aside, there were now more than 30 Mercenary Companies established around the world, making the title of the world's best all that more meaningful.

"The infrastructure looks clean and well thought out." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin looked around the interior and showed his admiration. The lobby, the front counter, the board with jobs listed, etc, etc... what he saw here was a space that perfectly blended the storied tradition of the freedom-loving Mercenaries and the cutting-edge technology of the present.

"Thank you. Well, after the story of how well designed our systems are, as well as superior benefits and bonuses we offer, current and former Knights are tripping over each other to register as our members." (Kim Sun-Ho)

Kim Sun-Ho said, his voice overflowing with pride.

"Oh, really?" (Sae-Jin)

"Ng. Even within my Dawn Order, a handful of Knights stealthily submitted their papers to the Monster Mercenary Company. They initially denied doing it as if their lives were depending on it, but when they got admitted in, poof, they left, just like that. Did you know how speechless I was back then?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

Yu Sae-Jung replied in Sun-Ho's stead with a slightly sour face.

"Hahaha... it's true. In my opinion, I think the clincher is the nocost artifact rental service the Company offers. Ah, since we are talking about that, would you like to go and take a look?" (Kim Sun-Ho) The no-cost artifact rental service.

It was a service where various artifacts of TM (The Monster) Company, known for their intricate design and outstanding performance, were rented out for free. It was also perhaps one of the exclusive benefits the Monster Mercenary Company offered that all the other Knights Orders was envious of.

Mercenaries who worked for The Monster could rent out an artifact carefully crafted by the lead designer of the 'Undisputed number one desired artifact brand as voted by the Knights' TM for free. As an aside, the job title of 'lead designer' was coined by people not from the company – and that title belonged to none other than Kim Sae-Jin, of course.

"I'm also kinda curious. Oppa, can we go?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"...Well, sure. Let's go." (Sae-Jin)

"Please, this way." (Kim Sun-Ho)

Kim Sun-Ho assumed a bright smile and led the way.

The interior of the rental office, simply named 'Artifact Service', was definitely not simple at all. The incredibly massive safe and the state-of-the-art security systems seemed to possess a brutal ambiance and made one shrivel away just by their presence alone.

"Has there been any theft attempts?" (Sae-Jin)

"No, sir. This security system here is bulletproof." (Kim Sun-Ho)

"...Very good." (Sae-Jin)

Since there were quite a few number of people waiting to rent out artifacts inside the office, they couldn't stay for too long. They spent ten minutes there exploring, before leaving that place and headed to the break room.

"Wow, this place, looks way better than in the photos." (Yu Sae-Jung)

The break room, over 200 pyeong in size, was impressively kitted

out, enough even for Yu Sae-Jung to show how pleasantly surprised she was – there were liquid refreshments and food available, and even facilities such as snookers and ten-pin bowling were installed here. (TL: 1 pyeong = 3.3058 square metres)

"I'm sure this is one break room that Knights of various Orders are most envious of. We're different from Knights Orders in that, our members are free to spend their time any way they like."

Kim Sae-Jin wrapped his arm around the shoulders of impressed Yu Sae-Jung and pulled her closer, before observing the activities of the Mercenaries with great interest.

"Hey, dude. Did you check this out yet? This 'A Deity of Four Directions, Azure Dragon' website?"

"Oh... you mean that c**p about some fairy tale?"

In the middle of all that, Yu Sae-Jung overheard a conversation that tugged at her curiosity. She stopped in her tracks for a bit and eavesdropped on the two male Mercenaries.

"No, man. Really. Haven't you seen the news? The site has predicted the location where the Azure Dragon was going to appear. And you know what, it was true..."

"It's obviously a bull c**p, so how can you believe in this sh*t?"

The number of visitors to the website 'Azure Dragon' had exploded as soon as its existence was mentioned on the television. Of course, since the site was ready for such an eventuality, the servers ably handled all the increased traffic. And so, the website had become really famous now. Still, a part of the population mocked others who believed in the site's claims, calling it nothing but a fairy tale.

"It's not bullsh*t. Didn't you hear that rumour about Spain trying to get in touch with the site owners in official capacity? You know just how many sea Monsters are out there."

"...Oh? So, who are the site owners, then?"

"How the hell should I know that? Some say, it's definitely the Guild Master Kim Sae-Jin..."

It was then, a single alarm went off from the Mercenary Clock. (TL: Don't ask me, either. No clue what this Mercenary Clock is. I'm just TLing it as literally as possible...)

"Hey, hey, hey. Looks like the job rewards are finally in. Let's go and get it."

"Uh? Really? Let's go, then. Next round is on the person with the lower..."

But when they stood up to leave, Kim Sae-Jin and Yu Sae-Jung were standing right behind them.

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"…"
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Both of them froze on the spot thanks to the unexpected entrance of these two people, who were basically, practically, figuratively speaking, their bosses.

"You should be on your way," said Yu Sae-Jung.

The way she talked to Sae-Jin and when addressing other people were completely, utterly different. There was not a speck of emotion contained in her indifferent voice, for the latter case.

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Misunderstanding the cold tone of her voice, the two Mercenaries began wrecking their brains earnestly in order to remember what they had done wrong.

Unfortunately, there was one. They did allege that Sae-Jin was the owner of that website...

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"We're sorry."
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Two Mercenaries spoke in heavy voices and suddenly, knelt down on the ground.

"Huh? What are you doing all of a sudden...?"

Flustered, Sae-Jin and Yu Sae-Jung waved their hands around in panic and meanwhile, Kim Sun-Ho watched the proceedings, full of interest.

On the uppermost floor of a certain hotel.

Inside this darkly-decorated penthouse suite, a news programme was unexpectedly being shown on a giant TV screen.

– The Azure Dragon has helped people out today as well. The infamous Monster that attacked the filming crew of KNS, the Ness, was killed by the Dragon. This miraculous event was captured on film by the brave reporter of KNS...

"I wanna make that thing my pet. So, what do you think?" (Bathory)

At Bathory's words, the Apostle lightly bit his lip.

He kind of expected this outcome, after seeing the appearance of that unknown lifeform. Bathory had this unexplainable thing of finding Monsters more adorable than actual people, after all.

"Ha, hahaha... Well, that is... We're just a bit too swarmed with work, so at the moment... To tame such a Monster, we might end up committing away a lot of resources, my lady...."

"...." (Bathory)

The Apostle did his best to beat around the bush, but Bathory's gaze that was sharper than the sharpest blade remained pointing at him.

"I know that. But well... I want it so much, so what can I do? Besides, that creature killed my Ness, too. So, don't you think it's only fair that that baby Monster takes over the empty spot of Ness in my life?" (Bathory)

Within the blood of Vampires, demonic energy flowed naturally.

So, it was incredibly rare to see a Vampire getting attacked by Monsters.

Instead, more often than not, there were cases of them being rather friendly towards one another. Well, rather than being friendly, it was more like Vampires manipulating Monsters using their unique Seduction magic...

"Of course, what you said is hundreds time, thousands time, ten thousands times correct, but... that, that creature seems just too powerful to be fully tamed..."

"...Hey you, are you trying to diss me or something? It's easy for me, if it's only that strong. And on top of that, it's still a baby. No matter how resistant it is, beat it up real good a few times, and it won't fight back no more. Don't you think it will be useful once we tame it? And most of all..." (Bathory)

Bathory pointed at the 'kid' on the TV screen and licked her lips in a somewhat suspicious manner.

"Look how adorable it is. Look at it cocking its eyebrows to appear dignified!! I just wanna bite it so much!! Kkyah!"

"...It'll die if you bite it, though..."

The Apostle somehow was able to swallow back his retort.

He really felt like killing himself. Just how was he going to capture a creature that was being called the 'deity of the East Sea' and the 'king of infinite oceans'? It wasn't like Bathory herself was going to help anyway, either.

"Besides that, I'm pretty sure that even the Lord will like it. I mean, the Lord already owns four pet Monsters – a Basilisk, a Cerberus, and, and..."

- You can find more information on the Azure Dragon in the website 'A Deity of Four Directions, Azure Dragon'.

Bathory's head snapped towards the direction of the Apostle in

an instant.

"You heard that, right?" (Bathory)

"Y, yes, my lady. This servant has heard it. But..."

"But what? Are you standing there waiting for your neck to fly off your body?" (Bathory)

"Ah, tha, that is... No, uh..."

The Apostle stood there hesitantly, his face now nearly full of tears. But he hurriedly run out of the room after Bathory stomped down on the floor with her high heel.

*

Almost at the same time.

"Waaaaahhh~~."

Kim Sae-Jin was in the middle of realising just what a bear living in a zoo must've felt like. No matter what he did – literally anything – he could hear people raising cries of cheers from the side.

When he shook his tail and jumped into the water...

"Waaaaaahhh~~."

...Shouts of joy rose up.

And when he opened his mouth wide and yawned....

"Waaahhhh~~."

... Again, another shouts of joy.

When he floated there and did nothing but blink his eyes...

"Waaahh~~."

...Even then, people cheered out.

'Seriously, where the heck did this cruise show up from?'

Sae-Jin scratched the back of his neck with his front limb as he

looked at the ship full of people that started to follow him around from some time ago.

"Waaahhh~~~."

Just like before, another shouts of cheer.

'...Uh-whew.'

Seeing the label 'TM' on the side of the ship, it seemed that Jo Hahn-Sung saw yet another opportunity and quickly started a new line of business as soon as the East Sea was cleared out, but...

"Fuu-woo."

...They were beginning to annoy him. Sae-Jin the baby Leviathan let out a long sigh.

"Waaaahhh~~~."

...And that was followed by yet another bout of cheering.

Hearing the same thing over and over again irritated him so much, so Sae-Jin spitefully spat out a stream of water.

SFX for a sound of water exploding in the air

The stream of water shooting up into the air spread open like an umbrella and showered down on the heads of everyone onboard the ship.

"Kkyaaah~~ Waaaahh~~."

But instead of screaming, they rewarded his hard work with even louder cheering and laughter.

"That was a great show displayed by the guardian of the East Sea, the Azure Dragon~."

The guide shouted out loudly. Just who could it be? When Sae-Jin took a glance... why, it was 'Jo Hahn-Sung', of course!!

Sae-Jin had entrusted him with very important work, but there he was, enjoying a holiday? Anger boiled in Sae-Jin's mind suddenly, so he shot out a thin and long jet of water and smacked the back of Jo Hahn-Sung's head.

"Aaaack!!"

Jo Hahn-Sung let out a big cry as he squatted down on the floor.

Satisfied, Sae-Jin let out a snort.

The people enjoying the cruise didn't even care about Jo Hahn-Sung's condition and continued to shower Sae-Jin with appreciation.

...As an aside, he learned later that Jo Hahn-Sung was actually on the ship that day because of work-related matters. All those onboard were potential future investors from the financial world, apparently.

< 32. King of the Infinite Oceans, Leviathan (4) > Fin.

Chapter 113: King of the Infinite Ocean, Leviathan (5)

Inside a cold and grey room, where not even a single ray of light could penetrate.

A lone woman, choosing to wear a thick black robe even indoors, was looking at the screen of her phone while sitting on a couch, while letting out a long sigh.

Two weeks. Two weeks, since the last time she chatted – or sent a text message to – with that man.

She thought about a lot of things in the meantime.

Unfortunately... the deeper her thoughts became, the more she wanted to see him.

Hazeline had always thought about him constantly before, but... The emotions of a person – no, an Elf – was a really crafty and cunning thing, indeed. She was fine with totally giving up because she couldn't see him, but then again, she also found it patently unfair that she was not allowed to see him.

"...That's Mister Sae-Jin, alright."

Swearing out like a sailor on shore leave, and totally ruining the pristine images of commonly-accepted Elven personalities in the process, Hazeline finally stumbled across the article about the website 'A Deity of Four Directions, Azure Dragon'. The Hero Orc, the bipedal Wolf, the Goblin – and now, even the Azure Dragon. Seriously now... it seemed like there was nothing he couldn't change into.

"Should I go and see him..."

Apparently, there was a cruise package that, when lucky, could see the dragon in the flesh. Alternatively, since she was beset with a surplus of cash recently, she could go and buy herself a boat, what with the market for yachts going through something of a revival at the moment.

...Actually, she already had got herself a speedboat that ran on magic power. She heard that it was fast becoming a fashionable thing to own one among the Wizarding community, so she got herself one. She also had driven it to those locations where the Azure Dragon was spotted previously.

Although he wasn't there, the cooling ocean breezes did help her unwind from all the stress that had been accumulating until now.

"Fuu... No, I shouldn't."

After completely accepting the fact that she had feelings for Kim Sae-Jin, she knew she had to step back and take stock of the situation.

She didn't want to do this. She felt frustrated. But in order to not repeat the mistake of the past, she had to stop. No matter how honest Elves were as well as how much emphasis they placed on their emotions, going at it twice was just too much for her. A relationship that shouldn't be, and that couldn't be, needed to stay within the realms of movies and TV dramas.

And that's what Hazeline had decided on. But before long, right there on her phone screen, it now showed a new post from Sae-Jin's SNS profile which was uploaded on 14th of January.

His smile as displayed on the screen was really open and bright, in an obvious contrast to her darkened room.

*

20th of January, the day of 'Daehahn', also known as the day the Winter would begin with a vengeance. (TL: "대한" Basically means 'big/major cold' and denotes the coldest day in the year. Apparently. shrugs shoulders)

As usual, Kim Sae-Jin came out to the East Sea to swim, only to receive a phone call from Kim Sun-Ho unexpectedly.

- "From the Chinese?" (Sae-Jin)
- "Yes sir. One of our Mercenaries who went for a job in China has found that there seems to be some kind of a rumbling over there to kidnap the Azure Dragon."

"Huh? Why would they do that? Have they lost their d**n minds?"

Sae-Jin frowned deeply. Under the soles of his bare feet, sands of the Wintery beach stuck tenaciously; if he couldn't get to swim today, he was going to get quite cross.

- "Well, it seems like the sentiment of the Azure Dragon belonging only to their cultural heritage has seen a surge in popularity. And not just the Chinese population, but even their government seems to think that way. Also, our government has apparently received a 'polite' request to lead the Azure Dragon away as well. Of course, the administration promptly refused to do so, saying that it's a nonsensical request to begin with."

"What the fu... They even cooked and ate their own Black Turtle, so what the hell are they even thinking?"

The Black Turtle, a divine beast that used to live in China. But the Chinese government killed it, in order to solve the massive financial crisis they were facing at the time. According to their excuse, it was a Mercenary troupe that illegally carried out the deed, but... Well, there was just no way in hell that any sane country would leave alone a band of Mercenaries that had caused such a huge chaos.

- "I know, right? Since we don't know what's going to happen, we changed what information can be accessed depending on the user's level on the website... But still, be careful out there."

"I got it... But, you don't have to worry about me. When out in the open sea, I'm pretty much invincible."

From his experiences so far, there was no creature alive that

could defeat a Leviathan within the oceanic environment.

Both Kim Yu-Sohn and his son, Sun-Ho, had stressed that Bathory was far more stronger... But because of the Leviathan's pride, he found himself questioning that very idea. It was not that surprising, really – how often could one find a creature that easily solo-ed a Boss-level Monster?

- "Still, I'm sure it'll be better to keep your guard up, sir. By the way, are you planning to swim today as well?"

"Yes. I'm going to be alright over here. Instead. Please find out for me just how close 'Jin Seh-Hahn' is to becoming a upper Mid Tier Knight."

- "....Yes sir. Understood."

Sae-Jin ended the call with Kim Sun-Ho and dived into the ocean, transforming into the baby Leviathan.

The moment he came in contact with the cold water, his mind cleared up and the fatigue of the day disappeared altogether.

He couldn't tell whether he was addicted to this feeling, or if this was the feared side effects of the Leviathan Form's growth, but he knew very well that, he'd be unable to stay still if he didn't come to the ocean at least three, four times a week.

"Ghereung, ghereung~~."

A warm smile crept up on his face as he entrusted his body to the ocean's currents.

The brightly shining sunlight and gentle undulation of the ocean; even the chilly Winter winds felt refreshing to him, who possessed thick scales all over his body. It was almost like drinking a refreshing glass of cold water in the middle of a hot Summer day.

And so, that was how he swam on this peaceful and calm ocean. He even had the time to gaze at the migratory birds busy moving about in the air trying to avoid the grip of Winter and thought –

aren't they Muffin's favourite type of snack?

And so, about thirty minutes had passed like that.

Sae-Jin sensed a strange flow of Mana. He definitely felt this sensation, even though he was as good as half asleep at that time. The flow seemed to enclose the surroundings and it only grew stronger.

However, this was the sea. Also, he didn't feel threatened by it, so he ended up not minding it at all.

And that was how it proved to be too late, by the time the sky suddenly became dark and the space where he was swimming became isolated from the rest of the world.

"!!"

The surrounding world simply vanished, including the sea, and only darkness remained where he was. Sae-Jin hurriedly opened his eyes and looked around.

'An isolation barrier?'

Was this China's doing? But wasn't this too fast? Sae-Jin's brain spun really quickly as he tried to figure out what the hell was going on, but when he took a whiff of a certain smell coming off silhouettes of 'people' appearing from the darkness, his expression hardened.

[We will now carry out our mission as planned.]

Smelling like blood and speaking in an unknown language – they could only be the Vampires.

Initially, there was only one, but then, the presences began increasing quickly.

Two, four, eight, then sixteen... Sae-Jin couldn't help but swallow his saliva in nervousness at the alarming increase in Vampires' numbers.

[Its appearance is really cute, isn't it? Can I touch it once we

knock it out?]

A female Vampire pointed at Sae-Jin and muttered something. He couldn't understand a thing she said, but she still gave him the creeps, so he slowly backtracked a bit.

[...Even you're acting like this now? Don't be careless, for this creature can deal with a Boss Monster alone.]

[I'm not being careless.]

When this woman smiled and opened her arms wide, a crimson-coloured whip suddenly materialised in one of her open palms. That was the signal; the rest of the Vampires all produced their weapons and readied magic spells.

""

Whatever the case may have been, these Vampires were targeting him. For now, Sae-Jin suspected that they were here because he had disrupted their plans by killing the Flesh Golem.

'Do I need to fight as the Leviathan?'

Sae-Jin fell into a dilemma. It was more than likely that the Leviathan Form was the most powerful Monster Form he possessed right now. But in this space where there was no water, it might be prudent to change into another Form.

He quickly looked at the darkness surrounding the area.

The Leviathan Form allowed him to understand all types of Mana flow that he came in contact with.

Although this place looked like the inside of an isolation barrier, it actually was not. Most likely... he was trapped in a 'Fissure', the space existing between different worlds.

And so, Sae-Jin was finally enlightened on just how all those Monster incidents happening all over the world were being carried out. If these bastards could artificially create Fissures, then calling out Monsters would be easier than taking a candy off from a baby's

hands.

'In that case, even the Lycan Form might not be enough.'

If it was just a barrier, then he could shatter it in the Lycanthrope Form, but now... Now, he decided that it was better to battle his opponents as the Leviathan.

[Attack.]

And when the leader-type Vampire spoke that one word...

Vampires easily numbering past 40 began their organised assault.

Mana Spears, whips, swords, fireballs, pale blue ice crystals, flaming arrows, etc, etc...

Countless magic spells rained down on him – a symphony of colours from spells dyeing the dark world in shades of rainbow.

Sae-Jin gazed at the phenomena produced by the agitated Mana, and then... perfectly replicated every single one of them.

Although there wasn't any seawater, the Mana filling up the body of this baby Leviathan was more than capable of producing brilliant and awesome magic effects.

KKWAHAANG!!!

The attacks unleashed by both the Vampires and the Leviathan, without a doubt, belonged to the same category of 'magic'.

But Vampires immediately realised as soon as their attacks collided, that the gap of 'density' and 'strength' between them was definitely not in the same category at all.

"Kkeuark!!"

"Kkeu-eh!!"

The copied magic easily overcame the attacks of Vampires and countless Spears and tyrannical storm winds swallowed them all up in one go. It was such an overwhelming might, not even their screams of pain and terror could survive within the shock waves of

the magic-induced explosions.

[...It is really strong. Not for nothing it's called the king of the East Sea.]

The female Vampire leisurely muttered. Seeing her, Sae-Jin felt something was wrong. How could she be that relaxed, when nearly half of their original 40-odd group had been killed?

Not too long after, Sae-Jin understood the source of her leisure. From the darkness, more Vampires made their entrance. And this time, there were lots more of them.

[Let's try this again.]

As soon as the leader-type finished murmuring his words out, numerous magic spells formed on the hands of the new Vampires.

Sae-Jin bit his lip.

[Ohh. Look at it biting its lip. How cute.]

[...Will you just shut the f*ck up?]

The amount of Mana he wasted replicating all those magic spells was around 10% of his total reserve. However, if he held back from using attacks that consumed a lot of Mana, like Breath, and utilised Skills such as Warrior of Reversal to the fullest, then... He should be able to withstand their assault for twenty more times.

'...Hopefully, I can end this before then...'

Sae-Jin's face hardened as he expelled Mana. All around him, drops of water bubbled up. At first, they looked fluffy and rather adorable, but these water bubbles suddenly shot out towards the Vampires, and then...

[They are explosives!! Run!!]

KKAAHAANG!!!

As soon as arriving near the targets, they caused a huge explosion.

And so, an unending battle that seemingly repeated itself over and over, began for real.

Magic spells Sae-Jin never had the chance to use until now continued to rock the Fissure like crazy. However... no matter how many he killed, Vampires kept on rushing at him like tsunami waves.

To see these beings with low overall population to use the human-wave strategy – panicking Sae-Jin then belatedly found out that these bastards were actually nothing more than artificial dolls. They were so well constructed, he could only discover this cruel fact after touching one accidentally.

Unfortunately, his situation didn't improve just because he discovered their trick.

He thought about using a spell that would blow up the entire space within the Fissure, but then, it would be meaningless if the few of the Vampires who knew the ins and outs of the Fissure's construction could simply slip out and slip back in during the explosion itself.

And like this, wastage of Mana continued on.

"...This... this might be troublesome..."

As his Mana reserve ran out, his consciousness began to blur, and his body started to feel lethargic.

He desperately fought off the uncontrollable fatigue, but in the end, stopped all his movements and slowly closed his eyes.

[Wow. Is it finally over? It's crazy strong. Elder, we ended up wasting over 1000 Mana Crystals today. Looks like we'll be scolded by the Lord...]

[...That's still better than being on the receiving end of Lady Bathory's fury.]

Just as the breathless Vampires came closer and touched his

unmoving body...

SFX for things receding quickly

Suddenly, winds blew, and the world regained its lost colour.

As the darkness receded and the nature returned back to its normal state, cold seawater embraced the drying skin of the baby Leviathan.

[...Ow, sh*t.]

And Sae-Jin regained control of his blurring consciousness and abruptly opened the blue eyes of the Leviathan.

---!!!

When his consciousness cooled, the only thing filling up his head was pure rage.

He didn't care just how this trap was broken, not at this moment.

He let out an angry roar without realising it himself. When he did that, a storm violently whipped up over the ocean and the waves began powerfully rocking back and forth.

[Condition fulfilled: The Sea Monster's Fury.]

The instinctive fury of the Sea Monster who was nearly defeated.

- The overall growth of the 'Sea Monster' Form will increase by 10%!!
 - The species-unique Trait "???" has been added.

"???" can only be acquired by divine existences.

Sae-Jin felt his point of view suddenly rising up higher.

Those damnable Vampires became a lot smaller than before, and in the distance, he could see a boat carrying the person responsible for disrupting the Fissure's formation. And on that boat, someone he didn't expect to see, Hazeline, was lying down on the floor in complete exhaustion.

[...Ohhhh.]
[Holy cow.]

The Leviathan had grown twice the old size, and it was now glaring at the Vampires with eyes full of hostile intent.

After seeing this appearance where the definite trace of the real dragon could be felt, they even forgot the situation they were in and could only express their admiration.

[S, since the event has unfolded this way, we should evacuate...]

Vampires tried to run away by changing into fog, but Sae-Jin wasn't going to let them.

In the blink of an eye, seawater rose up in circular shape and formed a huge dome, and all the Vampires who got trapped inside began carrying looks of despair.

< 32. King of the Infinite Ocean, Leviathan (5) > Fin.

Chapter 114: King of the Infinite Ocean, Leviathan (6)

Inside the gigantic dome of water created by the Leviathan, the flow of Mana to the outside was completely blocked off, rendering Vampires' unique movement magic spells utterly useless.

On top of this, they couldn't summon hundreds of dolls they used to fill up the Fissure, which only left a dozen Apostles behind...

[So, what should we do now?]

[Try contacting Lady Bathory, for now.]

Bothering their future queen with this matter might result in their limbs being torn off, but well, judging from the murderous look the enraged eyes of the Leviathan were giving off, it seemed the Monster wanted to rip them apart and then blow them up into specks of tiny dust to boot. It was obviously more preferable to just lose an arm or a leg instead...

[Uhm, ah... Well, I tried that already, but... this barrier might be made out of water, but there aren't any gaps there, you know?]

[...]

[Tehee. Looks like we're pretty much screwed now, don't you think?]

How can you laugh at a time like this?! The leader-type Vampire glared at the female Apostle and bit his lip.

Too bad, they weren't even given enough time to pick faults with each other.

KHUGUGUGUNG

The surface of water they were standing on rumbled violently, before being overturned by a truly terrifying aura and tried to swallow them up.

Left with no choice, Apostles began reciting magic spells. Although they were like a bunch of fireflies burning away in front of the mighty sun, the pride of the Vampires under the Bathory banner didn't allow them to give up without a good fight.

[Oh, well. We are prepared to die here, so you should escape alone, Elder. Your role of creating artificial dolls is crucial to our success. And more importantly, you already know this – that we can be reborn as your dolls anyways.]

The female Vampire never lost her leisurely smile. The leader looked around, and saw other Apostles looking back at him with determined expressions.

[...Very well.]

The leader murmured lowly. And all of a sudden, other Apostles began vomiting blood. This blood flowed over the water's surface and rose up to become a barrier against the incoming violent waves.

[I shall see all of you again later.]

[Of course. Please do hurry up, though.]

It was her job to open up the escape route. She vomited out blood one more time, this one aimed towards the wall of the water dome forcibly embracing them.

SFX for things melting (?)

The moment that corrosive blood came into contact, the wall of seawater melted and a hole so small that a single particle of dust might go through was created. And the leader-type Vampire immediately changed into fog and escaped through there. (TL: Hmm, water melting? That's a first...)

So, one of them made it out of there but the female Vampire, who was stumbling around weakly now, no longer had sufficient Mana left even to let her continue float on the water. Her body began to sink to the bottom of the ocean.

[I really hate being in pain, though...]

She quietly muttered as she witnessed the sight of the Sea Monster in a dragon's appearance angrily pouncing on her comrades.

SFX for things shattering

The blood barrier created by exhausting the life forces of the Vampire Apostles was shattered in an instant by the dragon's jaws, and then...

Huge, destructive waves caused by the Leviathan violently crashed into them, swallowing them up in the blink of an eye.

After the battle had come to an end.

Kim Sae-Jin the Leviathan lowered his long neck until his sight was on the level with Hazeline's yacht. Although now looking more masculine, the face of the creature still possessed some cute bits here and there.

"Hahah..."

She smiled weakly and raised her body up, before gently stroking the large creature's wet and soft nose. The Leviathan closed its eyes and accepted her patting. It was to express his gratitude for her timely aid. But then, Hazeline stopped patting him and began to explode out in laughter.

"...It's okay to change back to a human now, Mister Sae-Jin."

The Leviathan's body trembled ever so slightly. But even with that small movement, the sea reacted rather violently.

"Right now, thanks to your actions, there is an emergency warning out for strong winds and heavy seas, so please, don't shake around so much."

She spoke up to here and then, lied back down on the yacht's floor.

She didn't even have any energy left to talk anymore. She did spend considerable amount of Mana trying to locate the physical 'link' that connected the Fissure to this realm of existence, as well as to destroy it, after all. Those damnable Vampire bastards had placed the linking talisman at such a ridiculous depth of the ocean, one might have needed a submersible to get there.

"Fuu-woo..."

As she let out a long sigh, a splash of water could be heard, followed by the Leviathan changing into Sae-Jin as he climbed aboard the yacht.

"...You've figured it out already?" (Sae-Jin)

"It wasn't really difficult to connect the dots, you know... I mean, with the exception of Mister Sae-Jin, where in the world can you find Monsters willing to help people out? But still, it is really incredible – you can become a dragon? Just what is the limit of your Trait?" (Hazeline)

Hazeline stared at Sae-Jin as she muttered out. Feeling somewhat embarrassed, Sae-Jin scratched the back of his neck as he sat down on one of the seats available.

"But, how did you know where I was going to be?" (Sae-Jin)

"...Eh?"

At his wonderfully simple question, Hazeline found herself panicking somewhat.

The truth is, I sail on my yacht almost everyday, hoping to run into you. And just like always, I also came out today to drift around but then, I sensed a strange flow of Mana and decided to check it out...

Obviously, she couldn't say this out aloud.

"N, nowadays, many sea Monsters have disappeared, right? So I... uh, this has become a bit of fashionable pastime for Wizards

now. Thing is, the ocean is the origin of all nature, so the density of Mana here is so much higher. So, just by breathing in the air of the sea, Mana is replenished, the society is stabilised, the world becomes a brighter place..." (Hazeline)

"And so, you found me coincidentally?" (Sae-Jin)

"....Yes. And please, don't talk to me anymore. Feels like I'm dying right now." (Hazeline)

She cut off the conversation there, and as if to show her refusal to answer any more questions, she lied down on her belly. So, Sae-Jin took a good look around the yacht, hoping to pilot it instead of her. The grey-coloured vessel was of a decent size, and its smart, clean interior seemed to match her personality to a T.

"So, how do I control this boat?" (Sae-Jin)

He asked as he played around the helm. Since he couldn't see a normal ignition, he thought this boat could be a Mana-operated magic equipment.

"Hello?"

When he didn't hear any reply, he tilted his head and turned to take a look.

Snore, snore...

Hazeline's rhythmic and calm breathing could be heard. She had fallen asleep.

Sae-Jin stood there, studying her appearance for a while. Her thick robe was soaked throughout and was clinging to her body, proudly showing off her beautiful curves...

"Keheum."

It was truly a bewitching appearance. Spitting out a fake cough, Sae-Jin hurriedly pulled his attention away and focused on the displays surrounding the helm.

It seemed that the Goblins' Craftsmanship was able to display its

amazing usefulness here, as he could get the hang of how to operate this boat pretty quickly.

SFX for motors coming to life

When he sent in some of his Mana, the speedboat showed signs of movement. Thankfully, he had enough Mana to pilot this thing. Thanks to the Leviathan Form growing by extra 10%, his Mana reserve was overflowing right at this moment. (TL: the author has changed "yacht" into a speedboat for Hazeline's vessel in the middle of the chapter. Either he forgot, or doesn't know the difference between the two... I've TLed it as it appears on the raw. Please don't blame me for being inconsistent.)

Kkhugugung-

Unfortunately, he couldn't control that newly-acquired power properly, and ended up vigorously pouring more Mana in than necessary – and that caused the speedboat to soar up high into the sky like a cruise missile being launched.

"Wow."

Kim Sae-Jin exclaimed out in admiration and enjoyed this high speed cruise, but then, he heard a loud scream of a woman from his back. Stunned silly by this cry, he quickly brought the vessel to a stop and took a look backwards. Hazeline was whimpering pitifully while holding her head tightly.

"Sob... Whimper"

It seemed that, because of the sudden acceleration, her body was launched up into the air and then crashed down, thereby causing some damage. Sae-Jin felt responsible and slowly approached her.

"Are you alright?" (Sae-Jin)

"...G, go away. I'm fine. Fine, I said." (Hazeline)

Unfortunately, all she did was to cover her face with her hands and angrily pushed him away.

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"Let me take a look." (Sae-Jin)
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She shouted out and wildly shook her head, and at the same time, a thin stream of blood trailed her chin and fell down. Sae-Jin traced the blood all the way back to its origin, and confirmed that it was her nose...

"...Here."

He quickly handed over an emergency potion to her and returned to the helm.

This time, he poured in only the adequate amount of Mana, and did his best to maintain a steady pace as he piloted the vessel.

And so, about ten minutes passed by, and before long, Hazeline stealthily made her way next to him. The potion did its job and healed both her internal and external wounds, and she appeared to be perfectly healthy now.

SFX for a soft humming of a song

Sae-Jin glanced at Hazeline as she began humming out a song.

Her wind-swept hair; facial features that a divine potter must have poured all his considerable might to mold into perfection; and then, her remarkably flawless pale skin – calling this the most magnificent view in history seemed entirely appropriate at that very moment.

"Miss Hazeline?"

He cautiously called out her name, which made her turn her head and look at him. And when their eyes met, her body shook noticeably, but she didn't avert her gaze.

"...Y, yes?" (Hazeline)

[&]quot;No. Just go away." (Hazeline)

[&]quot;Wait a min..."

[&]quot;I said, just go away!!"

"I want to thank you for today. You really saved my bacon back there."

He smiled warmly as he spoke. In other words, that smile was directed to her...

She stared at him in a daze for a little while, before breaking out into a short chuckle and gently grasped his hand holding the helm.

"...If you want to thank me, treat me to a meal sometime later on. And you're not supposed to hold the helm that way – not like how you hold the car's steering wheel."

She began fixing his grip on the helm, one finger at the time – all the while, feeling her chest fill up with this sensation of satisfaction.

"Oh. So, I'm supposed to hold it like th... Huh?!" (Sae-Jin)

Too bad, this romantic scene came to an abrupt end real fast. In the distance, by the land where they were returning to, they could see vicious storm winds and tsunami waves powerfully assaulting the coastline.

"...Didn't I tell you? That there is an emergency warning out for strong winds and heavy seas thanks to you, Mister Sae-Jin." (Hazeline)

Seeing the chaos over yonder, Hazeline let out a hollow chuckle.

"D**n it, it's happening again. The Leviathan Form is just too powerful and it's hard to control its strength properly." (Sae-Jin)

"Ah, well. It's totally understandable for a Leviath... What did you just say?! A Leviathan?!?!"

Suddenly, she cried out in alarm. He could definitely see panic written large within her extra-large rounded eyes.

"Y, yes. But... what's the matter? Did something happen?" (Sae-Jin)

"No, nothing at all... It's just... I thought it was an Azure Dragon,

but to think, it was actually a Leviathan..."

Hazeline playfully distanced herself from him. Sae-Jin simply chuckled and grasped her wrist, pulling in closer. Her face blushing slightly at this light skinship, she stood right next to him as if she had no choice in the matter.

After that incident had come and gone, this and that happened.

The unseasonal storm caused by the Leviathan, named 'Supreme', brought about extreme weather conditions and heavy rainfall to the entirety of the Korean Peninsula; then, there was a huge explosion at the Gangwon Province's most luxurious hotel 'Romance of Dawn' which destroyed a portion of the top floors. And finally, less than a month after the Flesh Golem was defeated, another Boss-level Monster made its entrance.

"It's also in the Gangwon Province this time as well. Are you planning to go?" Asked Kim Sun-Ho.

Kim Sae-Jin was looking at a piece of an official document in his hand and had been pondering for a while now.

It was the so-called 'request for cooperation'. The government sent it over to Sae-Jin and The Monster, after realising how grave the situation truly had become. And on this paper, there was a list of names requested to participate, and lo and behold, 'Kim Sae-Jin' was among those.

"...They are even calling in High Tier Hunters as well?" (Sae-Jin)

"Mm? Ah, it seems so, yes. Well, the scene of you fighting had been recorded, after all." (Kim Sun-Ho)

"Well, that's true, but..."

Actually, it didn't really matter. A Boss-level Monster was a gold mine of experience points and nice, juicy bonuses. And if he participated in a Boss raid as a 'human', no doubt he'd acquire new Skills as well.

"What do you think, Mister Sun-Ho?"

"In my opinion... I believe it's correct to participate, boss. Of course, there is a chance that the government is actually trying to keep you in check with this, but if you, the Guild Master, participate in the raid, it'll be the case of 'Noblesse Oblige', a good chance to solidify our image in the public eye. With this chance, you'll become a bona fide saviour."

"...Hmm."

"On top of that, I hear the Boss is a lot weaker than that Monster bird from before." (Kim Sun-Ho)

Kim Sae-Jin's head tilted to the side in confusion.

"A lot weaker than the Monster bird? Then, why not go with a small elite force, just like back then?" (Sae-Jin)

"Oh, that. After the incident with the Flesh Golem, the government decided to take command from now on whenever a Boss Monster appears, so it's no longer possible to do that, boss."

"...Ah. Aha."

SFX for a mobile phone vibrating

Almost at the same time, Sae-Jin's phone went off. Kim Sun-Ho signaled with his eyes that it was fine, so Sae-Jin pulled it out from his pocket.

There was a single text message.

- I'm outside now. Where are you now, Mister Sae-Jin?

"Is it from Miss Yu Sae-Jung?"

Kim Sun-Ho asked with a content smile on his face.

However – Sae-Jin couldn't make a proper reply. All he could do was to evade the subject altogether.

And that was because, the name shown on the phone's screen

wasn't Yu Sae-Jung, but Hazeline.

< 32. King of the Infinite Ocean, Leviathan (6) > Fin.

Chapter 115: Heroic (1)

After ending the meeting with Kim Sun-Ho, Sae-Jin headed off to a famous restaurant with Hazeline who was waiting for him outside. Each of the tables were partitioned off in this restaurant, which meant it was perfect for someone like Sae-Jin who was just too well known by pretty much everybody.

"Excuse me? You're going to participate in the boss raid? But why?!" (Hazeline)

In the midst of having a quiet meal, Hazeline suddenly let out a loud cry as her eyes went extra round.

To show how shocked she was, she even ended up inadvertently squashing the meat of a fish she had been carefully cutting into.

"I thought that it might be for the best." (Sae-Jin)

"No, wait, why does Mister Sae-Jin have to go? Besides turning into Monsters, you aren't that good at anything else, though." (Hazeline)

"...What do you mean by that? Haven't you seen that video of me fighting all those Doo-Urk-Shi-Nees online? Hell, the number of views for that is already past ten million now."

Hearing Hazeline's words that could either be interpreted as words of worry or a barely disguised insult, Sae-Jin's eyes narrowed to a slit.

"No, that's not it. What if you encounter a situation where you can't deal with it as a human? Your Trait might be revealed to the rest of the world!"

"Something like that won't happen, so don't you worry about that. Besides... You know, I got this feeling that, even the current me as a human can easily defeat you, Miss Hazeline," said Sae-Jin, while smiling brightly. Hazeline reciprocated his smile with her own for a short while, but then, her expression hardened very soon as if her pride had been damaged by his claims.

"It's nice to be treated as a damsel in distress, but... You won't even last ten seconds against me." (Hazeline)

At Hazeline's cold voice, this time it was Sae-Jin's pride that got wounded.

"Ten seconds?! Hmm. Back then, when you got ambushed, just who was it that came to your rescue... If I remember correctly, a certain someone was just standing there, lost and confused – did I see that wrong, I wonder?" (Sae-Jin)

Kwajeek-

Chopsticks in her hand suddenly snapped in half.

"Back then, that weird barrier prevented Mana from following my orders, didn't it? Don't you know that Mana is more important than life itself for a Wizard? If they didn't deploy that stupid barrier, I wouldn't have needed your help in the first pl..."

"Yes, yes. I got it. You're indeed the A-class Wizard, Shenarine."

"Please don't push my buttons and make my old temper to flare up. Even though I look like this, as an Elf Wizard, my pride knows no bounds."

One could say the true essence of the modern day Wizards consisted solely of stubbornness, ego, pride and unshakeable confidence. In other words, a Wizard was incredibly proud of her abilities, but if one considered that said Wizard to be an Elf on top of it all... it didn't take a genius to figure out how crazy stubborn she would be.

"Okay, fine. However, just what kind of work did you do in the past? I heard you mention the Mafia, the Triads, etc, etc, back then." (Sae-Jin)

Hearing his question, Hazeline narrowed her brows as she picked up new chopsticks. Her hand movement was quite rough, her desire to warn him off the topic rather apparent in her mannerisms.

"You're better off not knowing." (Hazeline)

""

Kim Sae-Jin's expressions hardened. It sure didn't feel good to be treated as a weakling, unfortunately.

"If you're like this, would you like to spar with me after the meal's over?" (Sae-Jin)

He suggested as he sipped the cold water. Meanwhile, Hazeline had to lower her head to make sure he didn't see her lips trying to curve upwards in a grin.

"...But what will you do if you end up getting killed?" (Hazeline)

"Hah. Wow. I don't even know what to say to that."

"Okay, then let's meet up again tomorrow. I shall take a look whether you have the qualifications to participate in that boss raid or not." (Hazeline)

"Yes, fine. We'll see. We'll see."

Sae-Jin replied back bluntly, while Hazeline was laughing inside her mind. She was pleased by the fact that they were able to smoothly (?) plan out yet another appointment, just like that.

In order to counter all the chaotic Monster incidents happening lately, the Korean government temporarily created the 'Monster-related Disaster Management Task Force'. And currently, inside the briefing room located within the Task Force's HQ in the main city of Gangwon Province, a meeting was taking place.

"This Boss Monster is a brand new type that hasn't appeared before until now. Its outer appearance resembles a cat with a big 5metre body, but it seems that the Monster's specialty lies in its ability to manipulate minds. It has somehow gained control of many Monsters within the Monster field and has created an army."

The identities of those in the meeting were who's who of the Knight society. Kim Yu-Rin from the Raven Order, Vice Order Master from Goryeo, Daebaek, etc, etc – all of them were individuals wielding tremendous influences.

"In order to combat this enormous army, unlike the last two Boss raids where only the Knights with Tiers higher than Mid, upper Mid had participated, this time we are going to call on the Knights with lower Tiers, as well as Hunters with upper Mid Tier rankings."

"Ah, hang on for a second there. It's related to what you just said... Is it true that 'person' is also going to participate in this boss raid?" (Oh Jung-Hyuk)

The Vice Master of the Daebaek Order, Oh Jung-Hyuk, carefully tested the waters. After becoming a Highest Tier after his achievements got publicly recognised, he was walking around lately with his shoulders and back stiff from ego. Obviously, he was busy showing off, with the excuse of this being the resulting pride of a Highest Tier or some such.

"Yes, he said he will."

"Huh-uh. That means we must be especially considerate towards his needs. If, for some reason, something untoward happens to him, that will be a great misfortune for this nation..." (Oh Jung-Hyuk)

This was an expected response from the Daebaek Order – after all, they were able to rise up through the rankings solely due to The Monster's generosity and support.

"What do you all think?" (Oh Jung-Hyuk)

Oh Jung-Hyuk took a glance at Kim Yu-Rin. His eyes told her to follow up on his words, but she could only avoid his gaze while looking decidedly embarrassed.

"...Still, as a High Tier Hunter, it's only right for him to participate. I think it's already a show of consideration from our government by requesting him to join in this raid. Besides, didn't he say he'd participate with his own mouth?" (Kim Soo-Hoh)

It was then, Vice Master Kim Soo-Hoh from the Goryeo Order let his displeasure known. It seemed that, since the Trilogy's founder, Kim Yak-Sahn, was the Order's Master, and that the 'negotiation' with The Monster had collapsed some time ago, they were planning to be in an openly hostile relationship now.

"How the hell do you refuse such a request? From the beginning, they should have excluded him because of his circumstances. It's not always the best to stick to the conventional rules all the time. If the Guild Master of The Monster is going to join in this raid, what would other countries think of us?" (Oh Jung-Hyuk)

"Obviously, they would go, 'what a fair-minded and advanced nation'. What do you think?!" (Kim Soo-Hoh)

"What did you say? Is it 'fair' in your country if your president enters the battlefield personally?" (Oh Jung-Hyuk)

"What a strange example. Is Kim Sae-Jin a president already? Obviously he's not! Also, since he's no longer active in the front lines, and he's a Hunter only in name now..." (Kim Soo-Hoh)

"Uh-huh!! You're being too careless with your remarks!!" (Oh Jung-Hyuk)

A sudden outburst of arguement over Kim Sae-Jin became incredibly heated in the blink of an eye. There were quite a few members of the Trilogy present, so the two sides were split equally down in the middle. And so, the briefing room had become the ground for the totally-unnecessary factional infighting.

"...Everyone, just stop what you're doing, right now. Didn't mister Kim Sae-Jin say he will participate?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Finally, unable to endure it any longer, Kim Yu-Rin shouted out.

"Huh-uh. Even the Knight Kim Yu-Rin is saying such a thing?" (Oh Jung-Hyuk)

Was this a display of over the top near-religious fervor? Oh Jung-Hyuk slammed his palm down on the table and clicked his tongue.

"Mister Kim Sae-Jin did so many good things for you guys, yet you're acting so ungratefully..." (Oh Jung-Hyuk)

"What do you mean by that!! I shall call him right now and confirm his intentions, once and for all!! Will that be fine?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"...Keheum."

At her declaration, all the others kept their mouths shut. Some of them even looked at Kim Yu-Rin with eyes of undisguised envy. After all, being able to call Kim Sae-Jin on a personal level meant that she was that close to him.

SFX for continuous ring tones

They could hear the sounds of the phone's ringtone over the speaker. Everyone tensed up and waited – and waited, and then, waited for some more. Unfortunately, what greeted them at the end of all that waiting was a voice of a woman saying...

[The person you wish to call is busy. Please call again later...]

""

A loud chuckle broke all that graveyard-like silence pervading the briefing room.

"...With you acting like that, obviously he wouldn't answer your call." (Oh Jung-Hyuk)

Oh Jung-Hyuk's lips twitched in a barely-contained satisfaction.

"I, I shall call him one more time." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"No, that won't be necessary. He isn't going to answer it anyways."

"No, no. Wait a minute..."

"For now, let's postpone that discussion after confirming with him at a later stage, and resume the rest of the meeting."

For some reason, the mood inside the briefing room turned for the better at the expense of Kim Yu-Rin's embarrassment.

And as the meeting resumed, she continuously glared at the phone while carrying a sullen expression. But by the time Sae-Jin called her back, it was one hour after the meeting had come to an end.

*

1st of February.

The defensive line was constructed on the passage lying between Seoul and the Gangwon Province. Because of the Boss's ability to mind control many other Monsters, there were numerous Knights, Hunters and Wizards gathered up by the line this time.

And, if one were to pick someone rather special amidst them... Then, it would be a certain someone who was neither a Knight nor a Wizard, but a measly Hunter.

"W, wowsers. Isn't he that Kim Sae-Jin?"

"It's my first time seeing him in the flesh... He's really as incredible as rumoured, right?"

Almost everyone gathered by the defensive line continued to glance at the High Tier Hunter Kim Sae-Jin's direction, but none dared to approach him.

And as he stood there, being on the receiving end of all those envious stares, out of the blue, four Griffins flew in the sky above his position. Even though they carried riders on their backs, these creatures temporarily ignored their commands and circled above Sae-Jin as if to give their greetings.

"Oh! So this is where you were, Guild Master! I was looking for you just now."

Not only that, many high-ranking government officials, as well as Vice Masters of well-known Orders and several Highest Tier Knights came over, bowing their heads and requested for a handshake, too. One or two of them suffering from lack of patience tried to talk to him about this and that business-related matters, but Sae-Jin politely told them such things should be discussed after the current calamity was addressed first.

It sure was an awkward spectacle that didn't fit the description of a battlefield.

"...And as expected, he is surrounded."

Hazeline was loitering on the background, unable to find a good timing to get a word in. As she was in a dilemma, wondering whether to swallow the brave pill and step forward or not, Yu Sae-Jung appeared out from somewhere and occupied a place right next to Sae-Jin.

When Hazeline saw the two of them together, a sigh from the depth of her heart automatically leaked out. She forced herself to show up here because she was worried, but now, seeing the two of them together, it was likely her heart would ache bitterly for a long time.

"Excuse me. Which Wizard Tower did you come from?"

It was then, Hazeline heard a really familiar voice from her back, and her scalp tingled in coldness. It was just a simple voice, but still, she could feel her temperature rise up, and cold sweat began forming on her forehead.

"Hello?"

Kim Yu-Rin spoke again as she tapped on the thick-robe wearing

Hazeline's shoulder. Hazeline's breathing quickened. Sensing a strange change in atmosphere, Kim Yu-Rin tilted her head, and then...

"Miss Yu-Rin!! We're ready to start the operation, ma'am!"

"...Understood!"

...At the call of her subordinate, she quickly returned to her original position.

"Whew..."

Hazeline did her best to rein her wildly beating heart and let out a long sigh – before falling into yet another dilemma. Should she go away now, or should she stay and take a look for a bit longer...?

Lamentably, it proved to be too late to escape from this place.

That was because, in the far off distance, the marching army of the Monsters could be seen.

Small and medium sized Monsters such as Gnolls, Hoggs, Trolls, Orcs were being accompanied by larger lifeforms such as Ogres, Wyverns, and Basilisks; it was truly a once-in-a-lifetime spectacle, seeing so many Monsters working together to form an army and marching forward like that. (TL: I've no idea what a Hogg Monster is. Did a bit of research, but the closest I could find was some character from Overwatch. I never played that game before, so totally no clue whatsoever. Shrugs shoulders.)

'There's more than expected.'

Kim Sae-Jin lightly bit his lower lip at the sight of the five thousand-strong army of Monsters. The front of the marching pack consisted of weaklings, but the numerous Boss-level Monsters such as Basilisks, Three-Headed Ogres could be seen in the distance as well.

"...This won't turn out to be more difficult than the Flesh Golem, right?"

Although there were a lot of enemies, almost every single Highest Tier in Korea had gathered here. As long as there were no unforeseen events, like the Red Moon suddenly occurring or something similar, they should be able to overcome this crisis relatively safely.

SFX for a sword being drawn out

Kim Sae-Jin unsheathed his sword from his hips. A pure-white scabbard, and the jet-black blade that perfectly contrasted it – a sword so beautiful and intricately crafted, all the surrounding Knights froze in their tracks, totally forgetting the current situation and dazedly staring at it.

"Don't tense up, let's do this thing properly now." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin took a glance at the female Knight next to him who was staring at his sword, and lightly tapped on her shoulder while chuckling slightly to himself.

"Ye, yes? Oh, yes. That's right!"

The Knight of Eden, Yi Yu-Jin, shouted out in her frozen state. To run into a familiar face here, although he wasn't Jin Seh-Hahn currently, Sae-Jin still found it rather a welcome coincidence.

Kkwahang!!

It was then. The cannons fired Mana projectiles and signaled the beginning of the battle. With a loud explosion, projectiles accurately slammed into one of the faces of the Three-Headed Ogre.

"All personnel, charge!!"

And with that loud roaring, the entire world seemed to bathe in the blue hues of Mana.

< 33. Heroic (1) > Fin.

Chapter 116: Heroic (2)

Thanks to such a wild variety of Monsters rushing in like tidal waves, all the carefully-laid plans were thrown out the window and the entire battlefield descended into pure chaos.

It was somewhat unavoidable, since each Monster possessed different strengths and weaknesses, but still, no one could have imagined things would devolve into such a hectic free-for-all, where blood and flesh flung around like crazy.

Whatever the case may have been, Kim Sae-Jin continued to swing his sword. Perhaps surprisingly, there was no sword aura wrapped around his blade. Yet, wherever it went past, space and Mana shattered into pieces, and Monsters' bones and flesh were sliced apart.

This was the result of a certain, ambiguous ability imbued to the sword, called 'slice through anything', its level at a frightening [C+].

"Wow."

While he stood there admiring the sharpness of his own creation, another Monster jumped towards him. Before he could respond, Yu Sae-Jung stepped forward to defend him.

"Oppa, don't let your guard down, no matter what!"

She shouted out and stuck next to him, then proceeded to fire numerous sword auras to many different directions.

Kwahang!!

Pphurng!!

Kkhuowahang!!

The countless beams of sword aura exploded and carved out many craters on the ground, making sure that no Monster could approach her current position. She might collapse the whole ground at this rate, thought Sae-Jin as he looked at Yu Sae-Jung busy firing out more beams of that scary sword aura, all the while deeply appreciating once more just what kind of a little monster he had inadvertently created here.

'Here's the reason why so many people want to get my Mana Tattoos done. Seriously, how big has her Mana reserve become now?'

Actually, the government officials were busy asking Sae-Jin for a big favour almost everyday at the moment – some might even say begging at this point – due to all these terrible Monster incidents. They were asking him not to limit the recipients of the Tattoos only to his Guild members, but to other Knights as well – after setting a fair enough price point for all, of course.

"Sae-Jung, I'm gonna get out of here for awhile. All this smell of blood is making my head dizzy."

Leisurely observing her combat prowess for a short amount of time, Sae-Jin chuckled again and told Yu Sae-Jung. She quickly rejoiced at this and shouted at him.

"Go, now!! Hurry!!"

She was supposed to ride on a Griffin while fighting, but had to come down to the ground because she was worried about Sae-Jin's safety. She didn't doubt his abilities, not at all – it was just that, she feared for those unseen accidents happening to him.

"Argh, c'mon now!! There are so many of them."

At the end of her wild, nonstop sword aura firing, surrounding Monsters had all went away for a short amount of time. Seizing the chance of this breather, Sae-Jin handed over the sword to Yu Sae-Jung.

"Take this, Sae-Jung."

"Oppa, you're still here? Quickly get goin... What is this?"

"A present. Actually, I brought this here so I can give it to you." (TL: Really? In the middle of a battle?! What the?)

He smiled as he handed the sword over. After all, he was her boyfriend, so he should have given her a proper gift other than things like several Magic Tattoos, many different artifacts and...

Ah. I did give her a lot of stuff already.

Oh well, whatever. Although I'm still her boyfriend, it's true that I haven't given her any weapons since the Blacksmith tournament way back when.

""

Yu Sae-Jung dazedly stared at the sword. A beautiful, powerful sword exuding a noble aura, its body darker than the night sky and its scabbard whiter than snow.

After swallowing down her saliva, she then looked at her own sword. With that innate ability of growing even more powerful the more Monsters she defeated with it, there was no doubt that it had become a sword that was far better than some masterpieces right now.

However, in this very moment... even a casual glance told her all she needed to know. The sword Sae-Jin gave her was on the level of a national Treasure.

"Hurry and take it. This smell of blood is giving me a really nasty case of migraine."

Kkhugugugung!!!

The noisy tremor of Monsters rushing in could be heard once more. Only then, she took the sword and shouted back at him.

"T, thanks, Oppa!! Really, seriously thanks! But still, you gotta go, now!! Leave this place to us!!"

She quickly pushed Sae-Jin's back. And he chuckled as he left the area.

Whatever – now that he, as Kim Sae-Jin, had participated in the boss raid, now it was time to earn proper achievements.

*

A fierce battle between thousand-plus Knights and Hunters, against Monsters that easily numbered past five thousand. Knights were slowly getting fatigued from the continuous assaults of Monsters that didn't give them one moment of rest.

The number of Monsters had definitely decreased, but still, many of the combatants felt sick to the stomach, looking at the damnable critters seemingly endlessly lining up through the entire horizon.

"...Pant, pant..."

It was the same story with Yi Yu-Jin. Her Mana was at the proverbial rock-bottom, and the hand gripping the sword was trembling from the numbness.

"Are you okay, Yu-Jin?"

From somewhere, she heard Goh Yun-Jong's voice.

He was making a worried face towards her direction. Just as she was going to wave her hand to show she was more or less fine...

Right behind him, a large Ogre appeared out of nowhere and slammed its huge fist down at Goh Yun-Jong's head.

Yi Yu-Jin's eyes became wide open in panic.

"Yun-Jong!!!"

Her screams rang around loudly; Goh Yun-Jong raised his head to see, and then...

Suddenly, a shadow rapidly drew in close – a man, the ends of his clothes fluttering in the wind, flew in like a bullet and threw a fist towards the Ogre. A 'simple' punch shattered the Ogre's arm, and then, blew up the rest of the large Monster's torso. (TL: ONE PUNCH!!! Yeah~~ Cue the OPM theme music)

Yi Yu-Jin dazedly looked on, as the man leisurely landed on his feet.

The man who killed the Ogre with one punch was none other the Knight of Eden and her colleague, Jin Seh-Hahn.

"Ahjussi!! Didn't you say you weren't coming?"

Fully understanding what just happened, she smiled and called out to him.

"Focus first, focus."

Looking slightly embarrassed, Kim Sae-Jin aka Jin Seh-Hahn threw out another punch. A Monster trying to prey on him got hit by that fist in the face and got obliterated into bits and pieces.

"Mister J, Jin Seh-Hahn!! T, thank you for your help!!"

Escaping from the clutches of death, Goh Yun-Jong patted down his pounding chest and walked up towards Jin Seh-Hahn. Yi Yu-Jin's eyes were sparkling brightly as she waited.

"I told you to focus!!"

"Kkyack!"

"Eu-arck!!"

Pulling the two dead-tired newbie Knights to his rear, Jin Seh-Hahn powerfully kicked and broke the leg of an Orc Warrior nearby.

'For my achievements... The Boss Monster is still around, so catching that guy should be enough.'

Kim Sae-Jin used 'Partial Beastification' to become Jin Seh-Hahn, so, he was now far more powerful than his 'normal' appearance. Plus, as Jin Seh-Hahn's 'Trait', he could freely use his claws as well.

The current situation was, Sae-Jin faked an illness and left the battlefield temporarily, and then, rejoined it as Jin Seh-Hahn. This

was the golden opportunity to rise up to the ranks of upper Mid Tier in one go. He obviously couldn't miss this chance.

And after jumping into the middle of this heated battle, he utilised various Skills and killed many Monsters. Among those Skills, 'Chain Claws' showed off its particularly terrifying might. As this Skill allowed a single chop with his claws to rebound off one enemy and continue on to the next one uninterrupted, there could be no other Skill better suited for this kind of large-scale melee 'jamborees'.

However, his real aim wasn't simply this, killing lots of Monsters. No, in order to rise to the rank of upper Mid Tier, he had to catch the crafty Boss Monster that was hiding somewhere and busy manipulating thousands of minions.

Sae-Jin/Jin Seh-Hahn activated the senses of the Wolf and searched for the traces of this hidden Boss.

As his viewpoint widened, both his sight and hearing increased manifold.

Incredible amount of information flooded his optic nerve like a crashing tidal wave.

And as a result, he was able to spot a certain cat-like creature hidden among several large Monsters. And its feline body was also pretty big. Although it sure had a cute face, Sae-Jin had no plans to make it easy for this creature. He kicked the ground and like a bullet, stormed forward towards his new destination.

And it only took a blink of an eye – he arrived in front of the cat while shocking sonic booms exploded behind in his trail. Sae-Jin then grabbed the Monster's neck tightly, and...

"Here!!"

He ran like his b**t was on fire towards where he had spotted Kim Yu-Rin earlier on.

...Well, it was still a bit of a stretch to defeat a Boss-level Monster

as a human, after all.

"W, what the?! Who the heck are you?"

Kim Yu-Rin's eyes went extra round at this sudden turn of events. However, he simply shoved the face of the cat at her direction.

"I'm not interested in a pet right now!!!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"No, wait, this b*****d is their lea..."

SFX for a cat's threatening growl

At that moment, the Boss cat showed its resistance and swung its sharp claws at Sae-Jin's arm. He quickly let go of the Monster and retreated – by this time, Kim Yu-Rin realised what was going on, so she quickly slashed out with her sword.

"This is their leader!!"

Sae-Jin didn't stop there, and called for reinforcements. That caused the attention of numerous Knights to redirect, and they began approaching this d**n cat's position.

The Boss cat made a weird facial expression and its head turned this way and that, busy searching for an escape route, but...

"There it is!!"

"It's the red-eyed cat!!"

...It was already surrounded by dozens of Knights.

SFX for a cat's far less threatening growl – in fact, sounds more like it's getting flustered.

The Boss cat growled with just that bit less enthusiasm, and on its forehead, a waterfall of sweat drops began pouring down.

*

And, a week after the end of the defensive battle.

Countless reporters and filming crews as well as Knights were

present inside the Tower of Eden. They were here to bear witness to the ascension ceremony, marking Jin Seh-Hahn's historic 'fastest ever' rise to the rank of upper Mid Tier.

The youngest-ever upper Mid Tier Knight was still Yu Sae-Jung, but to equal her rank in only six months, Jin Seh-Hahn was the first in the world to achieve the feat.

"Until now, Jin Seh-Hahn poured all his efforts for the betterment of the society at large, and his exemplary actions towards the interest of the public makes him a role model for others to follow. For these reasons, the Tower of Eden now declares that the Knight Jin Seh-Hahn has now ascended to upper Mid Tier."

With an avalanche of cheering and hand claps, Jin Seh-Hahn was given the platinum medal that only the upper Mid Tier Knights could receive.

"Thank you very much."

Bowing his waist in a solemn manner, Jin Seh-Hahn climbed down the stage, and as the person with the title of 'fastest ever to become a upper Mid Tier', he had to talk to many other Knights on his way out.

"Back then, the sight of you fighting against many Monsters left a deep impression on me. I was really stunned by it at first, but thanks to your efforts, we were able to end the battle rather easily." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Attending the ceremony as the representative of the Raven Order, Kim Yu-Rin smiled and offered her hand for a shake. Jin Seh-Hahn/Kim Sae-Jin grasped her hand and nodded his head slightly.

"Thank you very much."

"It was a wonderful, very manly fighting style. I really liked it. If there is another chance in the future, let's fight together side by side, again."

"...You're overestimating me."

"Oh~~, so this is where our hero was!!"

And after he shook the hands of several Vice Order Masters such as Oh Jung-Hyuk, Kim Yak-Sahn and Co...

Kim Sae-Jin/Jin Seh-Hahn stood before the throng of reporters.

Many questions came flying towards his way. What was his plan, moving forward; the reasons why he donated most of his monthly salary, even though he still lived in a rented apartment; his thoughts as the newest upper Mid Tier, the fastest to get to the rank, etc, etc...

Sae-Jin only chose to answer those that sounded easy to reply.

"It's a simple reason why I donate most of my salary. This 'short' life, when I leave it, I do so with a pair of empty hands. And when the time comes, I don't want to have any lingering regrets or desires, so I simply try to help others as much as possible."

It was an answer that implied the fast-approaching death of Jin Seh-Hahn, but the unaware reporters only showed much fervor at this display of selfless generosity.

And after this press conference came to an end, Sae-Jin approached the officials of Eden and informed them of his intentions to visit the upper floors of the Tower.

Officials didn't stop him. No, they gladly allowed it, telling him to go and take a look at his new office at the 60th floor.

"Thank you."

He replied while doing his best to hold back a smile from forming on his face. After he climbed into the elevator, he didn't press the button for the sixtieth floor, but for the 81st, labelled 'Classified Information Archives'. He didn't feel like wasting time anymore, since this character was going to be killed off very soon anyways. As the elevator ascended to the 81st floor, many thoughts ebbed and flowed in and out of his head. His father and his mother – just what kind of secrets did they possess that got themselves killed? And just what kind of secret made Eden actively step forward and silence everyone?

It was then, the communication crystal vibrated inside his inner coat pocket. Before he could answer this call, he activated the senses of the Wolf and observed his surroundings. Maybe it was because this elevator was used exclusively by the Eden's Knights, there were no recording devices or CCTV cameras.

"Hello."

- "It's me, Yu Baek-Song. What are you doing right now?"
- "...I'm on my way to the 81st floor."

Kim Sae-Jin smiled slightly. Hearing that childish voice trying to sound like an experienced old timer, he couldn't help but recall her appearance and thought that she was one funny woman.

- "Already?!"
- "Yes. Looks like 'death' isn't too far away."
- "...Indeed."

Kim Yu-Sohn wished deeply for the character of Jin Seh-Hahn to die. It was the same story for Yu Baek-Song as well.

- "But, how will you do it?"

However, the method was a problem. He already had a will prepared and ready. Starting off with the words "I am fully prepared to live a life where I could die at any given moment...", this will was written by Kim Yu-Sohn. And boy, it was truly something else. It was written so beautifully, he feared that it might even find a place within the Korean language textbooks.

"I'm working on it. Since there are lots of accidents lately... Ah, maybe, I could go on a 'job' to that Romance hotel and then the

Bathory..."

- "That's definitely out of the question. Bathory is seriously one dangerous woman. And instead of letting them realise their hideout has been compromised, we need her to continue staying there in the meantime."

The information on Bathory was only known to Yu Baek-Song, her closest aide, Kim Yu-Sohn and his son Sun-Ho, and finally, Kim Sae-Jin.

"In that case..."

As the conversation continued, the elevator had finally arrived on the 81st floor.

"Ah. I'll call you later."

Kim Sae-Jin ended the communication and took a look in front.

Somewhere within this extensive library that took up the entire floor, the truth about his parents, as well as himself, were hiding. He felt anticipation and tension building up. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. And then, to be on the safer side, he drank a special potion given to him by Hazeline that could calm his mind.

Then, towards the scanner, he brought his upper Mid Tier identification card, and...

He took a large step forward.

< 33. Heroic (2) > Fin.

Chapter 117: Heroic (3)

Although he was finally inside the very archive he'd been dying to enter... looking around this incredibly vast place, inside of his head was rapidly turning blank.

All his life, he never held what someone might refer to as a relationship with books. So, right now, he didn't even know where to begin on how to find what he was looking for in this humongous library. Also, as every bit of these stored information was 'top secret', there was obviously no kind-hearted secretary or a librarian to help him out, either.

"Hmm..."

Sae-Jin looked around to find if there was an equipment of some sort that could help him browse through the info stored here. But well, there was no such thing – since there was also no such thing as a 'browseable secret information', after all.

In the end, he had to dig through each and every information contained in this library.

On these documents created by magic, many, many events were recorded in detail.

Such things as the time period when the first Fissure showed itself being well over sixty years ago, to a certain terror incident with explosives, which wasn't even a terror-related crime at all, but instead an act of sabotage performed by the government, instead...

They were the kind of incendiary stuff that might have made conspiracy enthusiasts/nutjobs wet their collective pants. But too bad, what he really wanted to find out didn't want to reveal themselves at all, at least not initially.

And so, as he was busy reading through various secret information, the sound of the elevator doors opening could be heard. And then, sounds of high heels stepping onto the floor following that. Sae-Jin put away the info he was reading back into the storage. At the same time, the footsteps ended, and he could feel a gaze directed at his way.

"And just who you might be?"

Hearing that rather sweetly flowing voice of a woman, Sae-Jin slowly turned his head around, and found a blue-eyed blonde foreigner looking at him. She was an incredible beauty, but... Sae-Jin could smell a certain whiff that no human should emit in the first place.

"I'm Jin Seh-Hahn."

That faint but undeniable whiff of blood. It was so faint, if he was not in Jin Seh-Hahn's appearance – using the Partial Beastification – he'd never have caught on to it.

His fist clenched tightly before he knew it.

"Oh. Jin Seh-Hahn, the one who became an upper Mid Tier today?"

"...Yes."

Sae-Jin did his best to maintain a poker face. He hadn't even found the information he was looking for yet, so it'd only prove disadvantageous if he reacted too suspiciously here.

"So? Why have you come here? No, besides that. Isn't it too early for you to enter this place?"

In her voice, a faint trace of hostility could be heard.

"I'm also an upper Mid Tier." (Sae-Jin)

"Of course, I know. You may have the qualifications to enter, but that doesn't mean you are allowed to."

"...What does that supposed to mean?" (Sae-Jin)

At Sae-Jin's sharp reaction, the blonde woman let out a short

laughter.

"Think of it as an unwritten rule, okay? There are lots of shocking secrets hidden in here... Of course, Eden's oath forces you to never reveal her secrets, but normally, when you've been an upper Mid Tier for at least half a year, you are given the rights to enter this place only after having a face-to-face interview with a Highest Tier Knight first."

...What kind of bullsh*t is this? Kim Sae-Jin wordlessly glared at her.

"...Are you dissatisfied?"

"No. But I am curious. Who are you?" (Sae-Jin)

"Oh, right. You wouldn't know about me very well. My name is Mary Chellin, Eden's High Tier Knight. I came here recently, after a stint over yonder in Great Britain."

Mary Chellin – it was... a somewhat familiar name. It felt like Sae-Jin had heard it somewhere. But more than anything, even her name felt wrong, somehow.

"I'd like to stay for a bit longer. After all, it's a friendly suggestion, and not an enforced rule. Isn't it?" (Sae-Jin)

"...Is that so? Well, aren't you... quite the daring type." (Mary Chellin)

In that moment, a faint killing intent rose up, but she skillfully dispersed it as soon as it leaked out.

"...Hmm."

Seeing her like this, an idea came to Sae-Jin – the perfect scenario on how Jin Seh-Hahn might die.

"But, well... Since a beautiful Knight has suggested it, so..." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin smiled as he walked towards the elevator.

The tragic scene where a hero would meet his end had vaguely taken shape in his mind, but there were still too many things left to finish – to find out all the info related to his parents, as well to figure out how the hell these stinking Vampires had infiltrated the ranks of Eden.

"A wise decision." (Mary Chellin)

It was difficult to read Mary Chellin's expressions as she watched Sae-Jin's back while he climbed into the elevator. It was a somewhat grim face, hard to tell whether she was smiling or glaring.

Leaving the tower, Kim Sae-Jin/Jin Seh-Hahn decided to walk back home. However, not long after, he sensed a tail following him. That forced him to stay as Jin Seh-Hahn, unable to change back, and he had to head towards Jin Seh-Hahn's rented apartment instead.

He arrived at the newly-constructed apartment building, where Jin Seh-Hahn had supposedly rented out a room. He entered the lift, arrived on the uppermost floor and punched in the security PIN for the door. He entered the place as if it was really his own home.

"...Mm?"

The apartment was kept nice and tidy, although no one had been in here for the last six months or so. He even picked up the faint scent of a certain person as well.

'Did Miss Hazeline do this?'

Well, this apartment building was actually owned by Hazeline, so...

For the time being, he took off his coat and took a quick glance outside. He spotted unnatural flickering of the shade cast by the office building across the street, as well as picked up on a faint, nearly indiscernible hint of movement outside.

"Still there, huh."

There were two of them. Judging by their lack of Vampire-unique "bloody" smell, they were most likely normal humans under some kind of mind control spell, or maybe, could even be those artificial dolls as well.

Closing the curtains, he put the kettle on as well as the television. When he fell into the comfy couch, his body felt comfortably numb and his mind seemed to settle down for some reason. Was it because he was always with Yu Sae-Jung back in his other place? To be 'alone' like this, it was...

SFX for a door suddenly unlocking

It was then, the security PIN was keyed in and the front door suddenly opened up. Surprised out of his skull, Sae-Jin immediately dashed towards the door, grabbed the collars of whoever it was that opened it, and slammed the person down to the ground.

"Kkyaahack!!"

Kwhang!!

Accompanying the dull sound of impact was a cry of a woman. Sae-Jin didn't stop there and grabbed tightly both her wrists with his hand, and then, pulled her hood off.

His body reacted purely out of instincts before he could stop himself, but actually, he was already beginning to think that this woman appeared to be a rather familiar figure.

"Ah, aharck!! Hey, that hurts!! I said, that bloody hurts!!"

With the hood pulled off, a beautiful face slightly covered by messily tossed golden hair and a pained expression was revealed.

And... it was Hazeline.

"Le, let me go, right now!!!" (Hazeline)

"Why is Miss Hazeline...?!" (Sae-Jin)

"I came here to clean the place!! What the f*ck do you think you're doing?!" (Hazeline)

Sae-Jin hurriedly undid the restraint only then, and she shot him a resentful glare full of anger while still sprawled on the floor.

"This hurts like hell, you know? I think it could be fractured... Seriously, why are you so d**n violent?!"

While massaging her red and swollen wrists, she angrily growled at him. All Sae-Jin could do was scratch the back of his neck, feeling really apologetic.

"...I'm truly sorry. But why are you suddenly wearing that particular robe...?" (Sae-Jin)

The robe she was wearing currently was specially crafted for her by TM and featured such attributes as 'high-level stealth' as well as many others, so when she appeared like this without any prior hint or notice while Sae-Jin was in somewhat of an alert state... well, he couldn't really be blamed for being a little bit paranoid.

"I told you, I came here to tidy up the place. That's why I wore this robe. I really like this robe, you know? But besides all that, it was you who asked me to take care of this place, so why are you acting like this all of a sudden?!" (Hazeline)

"Wait a minute, when did I ask you to..."

"You told me to help you conceal Jin Seh-Hahn's real identity." (Hazeline)

Hazeline spoke as she wiped the slight hint of tears from the corners of her eyes.

"Well, I did say that..." (Sae-Jin)

She already knew that Sae-Jin was Jin Seh-Hahn.

No, actually, it was more correct to say that he got found out.

Although his face was covered with thick beard, and he always wore a pair of sunglasses, there were still some similarities between Jin Seh-Hahn's face and that of Kim Sae-Jin's. And it proved to be nigh-on impossible to fool the discerning eyes of a certain Elf Alchemist/Wizard who could divide medical ingredients right down to individual grains.

....The real clincher in this story, though, was Sae-Jin's own stupid self, who, after receiving Hazeline's rather sneaky but clever 'probing' text message that said [Mister Jin Seh-Hahn, whatcha doing? ^^], freaked out and hurriedly called her to find out how she knew.

"W, well, please take a seat in the meantime. I'll go and get you a cup of coffee." (Sae-Jin)

He helped Hazeline to the couch and hurriedly prepared the coffee. She continued to massage her still-aching wrists while observing his busily-moving back.

"Really... how bizarre..." (Hazeline)

"Do you want it black?"

"Yeah. I prefer black."

Soon enough, Hazeline relaxed her back against the couch, while her lips began curling upwards.

To unexpectedly run into him in this manner – it seemed that her luck today was not bad. Honestly speaking, she was loving this sudden encounter, so much so that her feet nearly burst out in fancy dance moves.

For the following week after that encounter with Mary Chellin, Sae-Jin continued to dig through the classified information of Eden. And whenever he did, less than 30 minutes later, different Knights appeared each time and suggested that he should leave. Most of them were normal humans, but 2, 3 of them were

Vampires.

And the more he got on the nerves of these Vampires, the clearer the dangers reaching out towards Jin Seh-Hahn became.

The frequency of being tailed increased, and he even got ambushed by Monsters as well – and there were moments when mind controlled citizens attacked him out of the blue.

It was easy to see that they really had something big to hide.

- "It seems that, many information Vampires don't want to be revealed are indeed stored in Eden's archives, sir. That must be the reason why they have infiltrated it, despite the risks. However, those records are created by using magic, so they can't be destroyed or moved to elsewhere – which leads to their attempts to disrupt you, instead. Still, were you able to locate the info you were looking for?" (Kim Yu-Sohn)

The voice coming out from the communication crystal belonged to Kim Yu-Sohn, someone Sae-Jin hadn't talked to in a long time.

"Feels like I'm getting close. I've finally found some stuff related to the things I've been looking for." (Sae-Jin)

- "In that case, that is a relie... Cough!!"

Sae-Jin heard a dry cough that didn't sound good at all.

"Uhm, well... how are you feeling nowadays?" (Sae-Jin)

- "I'm feeling fine, thank you. My body is old and it has its good days and bad ones, so you don't have to worry about me, sir."

Kim Yu-Sohn spoke in a clearly-fake lively manner. Unfortunately, compared to the past, there was a distinct lack of energy in his voice. Sae-Jin was about to say how worried he was, but...

"Then, about the potion I sent over to you the other day..." (Sae-Jin)

- "Well, sir. I need to get going now. As for the rest, you should

call Sun-Ho... Cough... You should talk to him... Cough, cough..."

Before Sae-Jin could finish his sentence, Kim Yu-Sohn ended the communication first.

And almost at the same time, his phone vibrated.

When he took a quick glance, a text message from Hazeline was there, asking him if he was coming to Jin Seh-Hahn's home today.

Sure enough, because he had been acting as Jin Seh-Hahn throughout the week, he ended up interacting with Hazeline a lot more than before. Three times this week already, he evaded those pesky tails and took a break in this rented apartment, and Hazeline came over while carrying delicious food.

All of this was enough to make him feel guilty about neglecting Yu Sae-Jung, so... He typed a short reply and sent it.

[No, not today.]

However, different from the contents of the text message, Sae-Jin changed into Jin Seh-Hahn and headed to the Tower of Eden.

*

As he stood there on the corner of Eden's classified information archive, Sae-Jin's hands holding the documents were trembling noticeably. His back was soaked in cold sweat, and a dull ache invaded his brain.

Finally, after two weeks of nonstop hard labour, he had found it – the documents containing information on his mother, Jin Soh-Young, and the father whom he didn't even know what he looked like, Kim Jeh-Hyuk.

"....Ha-ah."

Wiping away the stream of sweat off his forehead, Sae-Jin slowly opened the documents. And very carefully, he began reading each line of text with all his focus. Trying his best to calm his quaking heart, he spent the total of five minutes reading the first page, but

then...

"Jin Seh-Hahn?"

A chilly voice drifted towards his direction.

Maybe because he was too focused on the documents, Sae-Jin couldn't even detect the presence of another person. Almost jumping out of his own skin thanks to shock, he quickly turned around to see, and found Mary Chellin standing there.

"You aren't supposed to look at that. Give it to me." (Mary Chellin)

She reached out while exuding a thick layer of killing intent. If there was a colour assigned to describe killing intent, then the aura coming off of this woman would no doubt be the colour of blood.

"...Can't do that." (Sae-Jin)

But he didn't back down.

"Is that so? Well, then... Do what you want. I already gave you a fair warning." (Mary Chellin)

Sae-Jin was getting ready for battle that could break out at any moment, but she simply turned on her heels and left.

< 33. Heroic (3) > Fin.

Chapter 118: Heroic (4)

Kim Sae-Jin's mother, Jin Soh-Jung – and his father, Kim Jeh-Hyuk.

Both of them were originally Knights of Eden.

For some unknown reason, his mother got into an argument with several high ranking officials of Eden, which promptly got her fired from her post. As written by Eden, the records stated it was her 'rebellious streak' to blame.

Whatever the case may have been, after leaving Eden, she changed her job to that of a Mercenary and killed many non-human races.

Then, on a certain day.

After operating as one of the finest A-ranked Mercenaries for some time, she went off on a particular mission to hunt down Vampires, as she would have usually. During the mission, though – she ended up encountering the offshoot of the Vampire Race, 'Nosferatu'.

At first, she did try to kill all of them. But then, she was won over by their persuasion – according to Eden, being deceived – and not only did she not kill them, but she even began taking care of many matters for them on her own volition.

In the midst of doing all this, she became pregnant with Sae-Jin. She deliberated on what to do, and in the end, chose to stop what she had been doing until now and returned to Eden's fold, in order to request for their protection. As a result of siding with the Nosferatus, she ended up becoming the target for the Vampires' hate.

Unfortunately, Eden's protection was negligent at best, and led her to die at the hands of the Bathory Vampires.

Kim Sae-Jin carefully read every word of the information on his

mother first.

However, when he turned the page over and the information on his father entered his eyes, his mind completely shattered into tiny bits and pieces, making it impossible to even form a single coherent thought.

His father, Kim Jeh-Hyuk, was a third-generation 'Mah-in'. (TL: Mah-in = Monster Man. Will use this term from now on. A Monster Man is a Monster that can change into a human's appearance.)

The story went like this:

Well over 70 years ago, when the world's governments were still trying fruitlessly to conceal the existence of Fissures, Kim Jeh-Hyuk's grandfather stepped onto this planet.

Was it because he was a half Mah-in? He longed to attain pure humanity. And so, he settled down peacefully, fell in love with a human woman, and lived a long and rather fulfilling life, quite unlike most of his peers who were quite a bit more keen on roaming the earth and causing all sorts of mayhem in their wake.

And two generations later, Kim Jeh-Hyuk was born. But hell, he wasn't even aware of himself being a third-gen Mah-in at all.

During his teenage years, he placed all his trust in his 'Trait' and acted like a low-rent thug, but he met Jin Soh-Jung, which became the catalyst to turn his life around.

To be with her, he worked hard to become stronger and entered Eden. And he even created with her a child that kinda resembled himself. But thanks to the Bathorys' scheming, he died without being able to take a look at the face of his own son...

"...This, what the f..."

The truth about his father being a Mah-in was incredibly difficult to swallow. To make sure he didn't read it wrong, Sae-Jin noisily went through the documents over and over again until he couldn't remember how many times he did that.

But the documents were indifferent to his turmoil; even the strain of Kim Jeh-Hyuk's DNA, recovered after his death, had been captured and stored within this archive.

Only then, Sae-Jin began to faintly understand just why he was granted such a strange 'Trait'.

'The mysterious powers called 'Trait', born after the world's natural laws became distorted, seems to be completely random most of the time, but it can also be recorded into one's genes as well. This occurs when a lifeform jumps between two different worlds and lose most of its original strength, so the laws of the original world will try to augment...'

This was an excerpt from a thesis Kim Yu-Sohn gave Sae-Jin to read. Back then, they were just a random soup of words he couldn't really understand, but now...

Countless strands of thoughts rushed in like tidal waves in his head. Nothing but chaos ruled his mind, and he felt a sickening dizziness that almost made him throw up everything in this stomach. Even regret began hounding him, asking if it was worth knowing this part of the truth.

Before long, he was plopped down on the floor. He didn't even have energy to stand up, only quietly holding his aching head. But his pain didn't want to go away. His blurred eyesights confused him, making it hard to tell whether he was in a bad dream or not.

'I didn't reveal my Trait because I was worried about being mistaken as a Mah-in. But... huh. I was a Mah-in for real.'

He laid there on the floor for a long, long time, before letting out a hollow chuckle mixed in with resignation.

Still suffering from confusion of mind, Sae-Jin exited the Tower to breathe in some cold air. But there was no strength in his legs and that caused him to stumble around like a drunk.

It was a not-so-late afternoon, and there were lots of people going about their daily lives on the streets.

Parents walking hand in hand with their children; students, laughing and walking to wherever their feet took them – these were the displays of love and bond between family and friends, something Sae-Jin had not been able to experience while growing up.

""

As he silently took in these sights while aimlessly drifting forward, too many restless thoughts invaded his head once more and complicated his emotions further.

Firstly, should he go and meet the group called Nosferatus, the ones who had some sort of a connection with his mother? But then, what? What should he do next, after meeting them?

"Hah-ah..."

Sae-Jin stood still and let out a soft sigh. Then, a handful of people hesitantly got closer to him. They saw the Eden's insignia and recognised Jin Seh-Hahn, and began asking for his autographs as well as to take selfies with him. He forcibly squeezed out a smile and said yes.

After talking to people and taking care of their wishes, Sae-Jin resumed his walk.

He walked for unknown amount of time without saying a single word.

On the opposite side of the pedestrian crossing, he spotted a person covered in a robe. The hood covered her head, so her eyes and nose couldn't be seen, but she was definitely staring at him. The evidence was that thick smile etched on her lips.

Sae-Jin slowly made his way towards her. And as he did so, the

smile on her lips became brighter and brighter.

He did tell her not to come... But, the sense of weakness that had taken root in his mind reared its ugly head. For him right now, confused and uncertain, he needed someone to lean on, at least for a short while.

And as he continued to walk towards her location...

Suddenly, the world darkened.

A small part of the curtain of darkness that seemed to swallow every bit of light, including even that of the fading sunset, transformed into a shape of a giant fist, and then – descended down on Hazeline's head.

"D**n it!!"

Sae-Jin madly dashed towards her direction. He powerfully embraced the totally-unaware woman, who still carried that smile, and activated the scales of Leviathan to the absolute maximum.

KKWAHHAANG!!!!

A huge explosion of impact reverberated, and shortly after, screams began ringing out on the once-calm roadside.

**

"Are you alright?"

Trapped underneath the rubble inside the crater, Sae-Jin asked her.

"...Uh-whew. You gave me such a fright, you know? Even if you hadn't acted, I would've blocked it just fine..." (Hazeline)

From within his embrace, a voice filled with fake criticism leaked out. When he took a sneaky glance downwards, Hazeline was there, busy fidgeting around uncontrollably, while both her cheeks were dyed in crimson red.

"I'm asking you, are you unhurt?" (Sae-Jin)

"...You are overreacting right now. Maybe Mister Sae-Jin is mistaking me for a helpless child in her teens? I hate being treated like that, so from next time onwards, please be more mindful of that." (Hazeline)

Hazeline seemed to be deeply embarrassed for some reason, as she was desperately trying to sound more assertive than usual.

"Well, in that case, my bad. Looks like I made a mistake in rescuing you." (Sae-Jin)

Giving her a blunt and obviously unhappy answer, Sae-Jin lifted the rubble off himself and stood up.

The scene outside the crater was even more hellish. Several unidentifiable beings of darkness were busy killing people and destroying buildings, their forms taking on the various shapes of large fists, blades, dogs and even Monsters.

"But why..."

Sae-Jin stared at this horrifying sight and asked the rather obvious question.

This was without a doubt, the handiwork of the Vampires, but why did they go to all this trouble? All he did was to take a gander at his own complicated origins as well as the mystery of his parents' deaths.

But to cause such a huge incident that could pull forth the focus of the entire world, just because of those information? Wasn't that like killing an ant with a knife designed to butcher cows? The risk associated with this move was simply too high for the supposed reward on offer.

"What are you waiting for? Isn't this the time for the hero to step forward?"

While he stood there in a dilemma, Hazeline spoke up as she tapped on his shoulder.

'Hero.'

When he heard that word, a lightbulb went off inside his head. Now that he thought about it, the perfect opportunity had unexpectedly arrived in front of him, hadn't it?

"...Miss Hazeline."

Sae-Jin intensely stared at Hazeline. Her face reddened once more as his sharp and manly face focused only on her, and she took a step back. But she didn't forget to reply in a manufactured calmness.

"W, what's the matter?"

"Today, I need your help. I'm going to die today." (Sae-Jin)

Before she could show her terrified shock after hearing his declaration, Sae-Jin pulled out the communication crystal and called a certain someone.

"Mister Kim Yu-Sohn."

- "Ah, sir, it's me, Kim Sun-Ho."

It seemed that the graveness of the situation had been already transmitted to him, as Kim Sun-Ho's voice sounded urgent.

"Are you aware of the current situation?"

- "Yes, boss. The government already requested us for an aid, so six Griffin Riders have been dispatched as we speak. And also, with the issuing of emergency notice, several Mercenaries are heading over there as well."

"Ah, is that so? Anyway, Mister Kim Sun-Ho. Jin Seh-Hahn will die today."

– "Boss? Ah... Yes sir. I'll give Miss Yu Baek-Song a call and also deploy the operatives right away."

Ending the magic communication, Sae-Jin asked Hazeline with a playful voice.

"Just in case, do you know of any magic spells that can place a person in a state of suspended animation?" (Sae-Jin)

"....I might know one such spell..." (Hazeline)

"...Oh, so you do?"

"Yes."

He honestly didn't expect such a spell to exist. Sae-Jin got impressed by Hazeline's ability as a Wizard all of a sudden, while clenching his fist tightly enough to emit cracking noises.

"Well, in that case... Let's get going, then." (Sae-Jin)

"No, wait a d**n minute!! You should explain yourself first... Euh!!" (Hazeline)

"Mister Sun-Ho should be arriving soon; hear the rest from him." (Sae-Jin)

KWAHANG!!!

When Sae-Jin pressed forward into the air with a terrifying might, a huge shock wave shot out in a straight line and blew away all the darkness in its wake. And as the darkness lifted and the scenery became clearer, a mother hugging her child and screaming her heart out could be seen. He changed course almost instinctively and ran towards her, immediately destroying a dark figure shaped like a person hovering near her.

"Kkeuck!!"

The tightly-closed eyes of the mother slowly opened in confusion when nothing happened. And a face of a smiling man filled up the entirety of her vision.

"Please, do not worry. I'm from Eden."

As soon as he was done with the hero cosplay, as he expected, a b*****d emitting that foul smell of Vampires attacked him.

The stinking b*****d, covered in head to toe by the darkness, ran

up to him and swung its blade without a care or regard for anything.

Clang!!

Claws and the blade collided, sending countless sparks to fly off. But well, the enemy's blade simply crumbled into pieces after that single collision.

```
" "
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Checking his broken stump of a sword for a bit, the darkness stealthily took a step back and surveyed its surroundings.

As expected of Korea that boasted the best level of super-quick response time and suppression in the world – the loud, spirited cries and calls of sharp Mana from the arriving Knights resounded out all over the area.

Since the situation had become critical, the smelly b*****d was forced to reveal its trump card. It stood still all of a sudden, and then began reciting a strange chant. There was no sound muttered, only its lips moving incessantly.

It recited for the next ten seconds straight, and when that was over, the darkness that was shrouding the sky suddenly retracted and concentrated into the shape of a huge meteor high in the air.

It didn't burn like a huge fireball should, nor did it emit any thunderous noises.

Yet, as it rapidly descended with nary a whisper on the ground, the sight of it alone was enough to instil a sense of total despair in the hearts of all civilians watching it.

What would happen, if something that terrifying fell? Countless civilians lifted their fear-filled eyes towards the sky to look, while some of them quickly began running away with their trembling legs.

"Kek. Work hard." (Vampire)

As Kim Sae-Jin/Jin Seh-Hahn fixedly stared at the falling meteor, the smelly b*****d let out an equally odious grin and disappeared from the spot – a sneer, saying it'd like to see how Sae-Jin might deal with this. And almost right away, he felt a blood-red pair of eyes focusing on him.

It looked like that, this meteor was the sure-kill hidden weapon prepared to destroy Jin Seh-Hahn for good.

But for Kim Sae-Jin... he was feeling so happy inside right now, he almost wanted to thank these fools who had laid out the perfect stage for him.

Looking at the giant black meteor falling towards the earth, Sae-Jin summoned forth every drop of Mana in his body. If it was on that level... although it wouldn't be easy, he should be able to deal with it.

"Mister Sae-Jin!!"

He thought he heard Hazeline's voice. She was lying on the ground, mimicking a wounded survivor.

Sae-Jin gave her a signal with his eyes, and then...

Kwahang!!

He kicked the ground hard and launched into the air, becoming a single blue line that shot towards the falling meteor.

In that moment, the eyes of the civilians focused on that line. Even the Knights, who were busy cutting apart the darkness, stopped what they were doing temporarily and stared at that remarkable sight.

< 33. Heroic (4) > Fin.

Chapter 119: Heroic (5)

Sae-Jin shot forward like a bolt of lightning and arrived at the edge of the meteor. Right away, the incredible temperature of the d**n thing wrapped around him as if it wished to melt him down completely. Thanks to this scary heat, the armour set he painstakingly created was melting like wax.

He didn't expect this. Panicking somewhat, he quickly activated both the Warrior of Reversal and the Leviathan's Scales. Only then the heat finally became somewhat tolerable, allowing him to reach out towards the meteor's surface. It was boiling hot, irregularly shaped, and covered in pure darkness.

He wondered briefly what he should do with this meteor but an idea came to him soon enough. Now that he thought about it, there was no need for him to smash it up with his bare fist.

'The Mana Body.'

Couldn't he freely control Mana at will? All he had to do was to rely on this power and change the composition and property of this meteor – he could reduce the killing power to o, but raise its visual and auditory impact to an absolutely terrifying maximum.

Concluding his thoughts up to here, he placed his hand on the surface and poured his Mana in. Then, the once-quiet meteor began humming uneasily and its surface began wavering as it kept falling to the ground. For Kim Sae-Jin, this was a good sign, but for everyone else watching from the ground below, it was an incredibly worrying change.

"W, what the hell!!"

"It's gonna explode!!"

The jet-black meteor quivered as if it was going to explode. It was as if a fireball was getting ready to expel its own flames out. Civilians and Knights looked on and cried out in despair.

But the actions taken by Kim Sae-Jin the next moment was enough to extinguish that despair out of their hearts.

He clasped the meteor tightly with both of his hands, and expelled Mana out from the bottom of his feet like a rocket, and carried the huge black object back up into the sky.

He soared higher and higher, as if he was prepared to die together with the meteor. From the perspective of the villain who caused this incident, it must've looked like a courageous decision completely out of their previous expectations.

Seeing this amazing scene straight out of their wildest dreams, everyone forgot to run away and continued to look on, completely dumbfounded. What they were seeing was a lone man lifting the heavens up, and it was an utterly heroic sight to behold.

'This... should be far enough.'

He pushed the meteor higher and higher until he arrived at the middle of the sky, then he clenched his fist as tightly as he could.

And then – slammed his fist down on the meteor, its property already changed to something else.

KKWAHAHANG!!!

The world was swallowed up by gigantic explosions. The meteor was bathed in pure white light and blew up into countless fragments. Terrifying shock waves swept out and destroyed nearby buildings, and debris flung in the air to every direction. Knights moved quickly and swung their weapons in order to protect the civilians from the falling debris.

"...Ah."

Before long, the dozens and dozens of explosions finally came to a stop. And a small gasp leaked out from someone in the crowd of civilians.

Up on the sky high above their heads, Jin Seh-Hahn was falling

*

After blowing up the meteor, Sae-Jin withdrew the remaining energy from his body and retracted his Mana. Actually, there wasn't anything left to retract in the first place. He spent every drop of his Mana and he actually couldn't exert any strength to his body, after all.

Whatever the case may have been, as soon as he lost the support of Mana, he began free falling from the high altitude.

Initially, the speed of falling was so great that it became hard to breathe due to the air pressure building up. But soon enough, the speed decreased by a huge amount and his descent became far more comfortable as a result. Probably Hazeline was to thank for that.

SFX for a gentle swoosh

Slowly settling down on the ground like a falling Autumn leaf, a slim smile slowly formed on his lips as if to say this had been a plentiful satisfying life he had lived.

The only thing remaining now, was Hazeline's magic to cap off the perfect finale.

"Are you alright?!"

However, a scared cry of a woman slammed into his ear canals with vengeance.

His head hurt from the high decibel of that cry, so he minutely cracked open his eyes to look, only to find Hazeline's shocked and worried face filling up his vision.

"Answer me, are you alright!!"

When Sae-Jin didn't reply, she began bursting out in tears and shook his body.

What the hell is she doing?!

Panicking inwardly, somewhat, Sae-Jin couldn't endure it and ended up opening his eyes a little wider and coughed out weakly.

At the same time, countless eyes focused on him.

Too bad, Kim Sae-Jin was determined to die. He slowly reached out with his shaking hands and gently stroked her cheek. And then...

"

whatareyoudoinghurryupwithsuspendedanimationmagicthingyalre

...He whispered a rapid firing of words so low that only Hazeline could possibly hear it. She immediately realised it, quickly closed her mouth that was hanging loose in 'O' shape, and after wiping her tears away, began chanting a magic spell.

"Thank you."

This time, Sae-Jin spoke loudly enough so others could hear him. As he staged the final moments of his death, the flow of Mana controlled by Hazeline entered his nostrils.

Almost in an instant, his consciousness began to blur. This feeling was far too complicated to describe...

""

And so, he passed out, seemingly dead, while showing the whites of his eyes. Since such a sight was somewhat unfitting for the final moments of a hero, Hazeline carefully closed his eyelids.

Soon after, deathly stillness visited the world. There were so many people and Knights standing here, yet not a murmur nor breathing could be heard. They simply stood there, dazedly taking in the end of a true hero, who was lying there comfortably.

Those melted armour pieces, his skin and flesh charred and burnt black; his gently closed eyes and on his lips, the last smile he'd ever make.

Just what compelled him to sacrifice himself like that? Just why

was he making that satisfied smile as he lay there?

Hazeline stealthily checked the atmosphere around her, and then...

"Sob..."

...Started a rather amateurish performance and beat her chest. This prompted a few of the tearful onlookers to slowly approach her and the dead (?) man. On the other hand, Hazeline was panicking inwardly as the prospect of being surrounded by strangers was fast becoming a reality.

"Please, make way!!"

Before she was completely surrounded, though – thankfully, a team of paramedics prepared by Kim Sun-Ho arrived on the scene. Pushing away the wall of crowd, they quickly loaded Kim Sae-Jin onto the ambulance and drove off to somewhere.

In front of the Korean National Hospital, where the entry was strongly regulated due to special circumstances of the patients resting inside – reporters from all corners of the globe had set up a camp. They all wore the kind of neat, tidy clothes that didn't stand out. They were also uncharacteristically keeping silent while waiting for the announcement from the doctors.

"Hah-ah."

Although there were a lot of people present, the only sound infrequently breaking the silence was those long sighs.

A miraculous life, a tragic death – under the dark sky where rain fell like tears from heaven, no one was brave enough to raise a fuss over the life and death of a bona fide hero.

And they waited for a long time, while the anxiety kept assaulting them. Finally, they saw through the front entrance's glass a doctor with a pale face walking towards them. Reporters

hurriedly got ready and waited for this man's arrival.

"My name is Kim Hark-Do."

Kim Hark-Do, a renowned surgeon who performed his operations while extracting the maximum amount of effects from various potions, faced the throng of reporters and nervously swallowed his saliva.

"...Knight Jin Seh-Hahn didn't suffer any fatal exterior wounds. It was on the level where an operation was deemed unnecessary, and potions would have been sufficient to heal his wounds."

At the good doctor's opening statement, all the eyes of the reporters went extra round. But that was not the end – he sighed out deeply and continued on with his words.

"However... by momentarily exploding several times past his limits and squeezing out every ounce of Mana... he suffered the condition of 'Mana Deviation', and so..."

His head hung down as if he couldn't face the crowd anymore.

"...20:51, Monday, 17th of March. Knight Jin Seh-Hahn has been officially declared as killed in action."

Not a single camera flash went off. As the sounds of falling rain sorrowfully echoed in this lonely place, reporters lowered their heads in heavy silence.

Officially, Jin Seh-Hahn was dead. And the aftermath was as Kim Yu-Sohn had predicted – 'a hero's death would ignite the spark of hope in the masses'.

A nationwide, nay, a worldwide mourning took place to remember his passing.

Within the open arena in front of the historic Gwang-hwamun Gate, civilians voluntarily built a platform for people to come and pay their respects to Jin Seh-Hahn.

The headlines appearing on various newspapers around the world portrayed him as a hero and competed hard against one another to get the latest news out. All the while, the Korean government was deliberating on whether to give the man a national funeral or not.

"Jin Seh-Hahn died a true hero. But the legacy of his life where he gave it all to the bitter end for the good of everyone and the society at large, as well as the martial art school founded in his honour, Jin Mudo, will continue to shine in our world."

Currently, this was the Gwang-hwamun Gate where a memorial service was being held in honour of Jin Seh-Hahn. Innumerable amount of people had gathered here, shedding tears and listening to the words of remembrance.

'Seriously, hasn't this blown out of proportions too much now?!'

Kim Sae-Jin had come here along with Yu Sae-Jung, but he just couldn't get rid of this fear of things snowballing out of control.

"A star... has fallen." (Yu Sae-Jung)

The service had come to its conclusion; Yu Sae-Jung leaned against Sae-Jin's shoulders and murmured in a lonely voice. Since Sae-Jin had no clue what to say here, he simply nodded his head.

"That guy, I hear he will be inducted into the Hall of Fame." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"...Really?"

"Ng."

Getting inducted into the Hall of Fame was perhaps the greatest medal of honour a Knight could hope to receive, so much so that it was often called the Nobel Prize for the Knights.

As Knights from the entire world were scrutinised and selected, there had only ever been five Knights from Korea to be inducted into this Hall of Fame so far.

"That's nice," said Sae-Jin as he placed a chrysanthemum flower in front of Jin Seh-Hahn's portrait.

"...I hope you can find never-ending happiness over there." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Not thinking about anything, he stood there in a 'silent prayer' mode, but then, heard Yu Sae-Jung's way-too serious voice from the side. He was somehow able to hold back a wry smile from breaking out.

Another two weeks passed by since then.

When the emotional memorial services came to their natural end, rational questions and suspicions began rising in the public's minds. Just who were the ringleaders behind the death of Jin Seh-Hahn?

The rage of the public and Knights began to boil over when 'someone' posited that the Vampires were the ones responsible.

Sure enough, a public demonstration took place, with its attendees demanding the extermination of Vampires. And even the president of the country, in the televised speech, clearly expressed his regret and anger, promising to uncover the true villains and make them answer for their crimes.

And so, on a certain early morning, when not a single day of peace had passed by in a while.

A bluish light and the slightly cold air woke Sae-Jin up from his sleep. The bed next to him felt empty so he looked around, and found Yu Sae-Jung busy applying make-up so early in the morning.

"...Are you going somewhere?" (Sae-Jin)

He asked as he yawned out loudly.

"Ng."

A woman applying make-up was at her most busiest. But still, her

short answer kind of stuck a needle in him.

"What's the occasion? And where are you going to?" (Sae-Jin)

"To a ball." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"...Huh?"

Sae-Jin narrowed his eyes. She said she was going to a 'ball' – first of all, something didn't quite sound right. No, it stank, actually. After all, in a ball, didn't men and women dance together or some such?

"And why are you going there?" (Sae-Jin)

"Mm? Oh, it's nothing, really. It's actually a gathering of top 100 businesses in the country, but... because of the recent incident, it's going to be really boring, I think." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"...Really? But why are you getting ready alone? Can't I come with you?" (TL: Yeah, why can't he? I mean, his Guild probably makes way more moolah then some of those "top 100" businesses if one seriously thinks about it.)

He scratched the back of his neck while asking her. Yu Sae-Jung made an apologetic smile and shook her head slowly.

"I also wanna do that, but... my dad and grandpa will be there, too."

Kim Sae-Jin's eyes became even more narrower. For some weird reason, Yu Sae-Jung didn't want to introduce him to her father and grandfather. Weird, since both of them didn't even object to their relationship.

"Well, fine. Actually, I also am going to meet someone today. A woman, as a matter of fact." (Sae-Jin)

"...What?"

Having his ego properly poked with a needle, Sae-Jin launched

his own low-blow counterattack. That caused Yu Sae-Jung to furrow her brows and react seriously.

"Why? And with who?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"I promised Miss Hazeline a good meal, you see. Why? Am I not allowed to go?" (Sae-Jin)

"Ah~~. Nope. It's okay. Have fun."

"...Eh?"

However, she was unexpectedly easy-going with her reply. Seeing this, Kim Sae-Jin couldn't help but be dazed slightly. He was joking about the meal thing, actually...

"Oppa should meet up with her and console her properly, you know? I mean, Unni must be suffering a lot right now." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"...?"

A question mark floated on top of Sae-Jin's head. Console her? She was suffering? What the heck was she suddenly talking about...?

"Seriously, her lover passed on like that, so... can you imagine how hurt she is right now? Oppa needs to properly help her out, you know. Ah, right. You don't have to do it too properly, though."

Finishing up with beautifying herself already, she got up from her seat and lightly tapped on Sae-Jin's shoulder. She then put on a coat, picked up her handbag, and left the bedroom.

Stuck in a total daze, Sae-Jin's eyes chased after her departing back. Hazeline's lover... What the hell was that all about?

"...Could it be?!"

Suddenly, a thought flashed by in his mind so he quickly accessed his phone, still not completely convinced of the possibility.

He couldn't find anything remotely like what Yu Sae-Jung was

talking about in the regular portal sites, but... on the forums of the Dawn's official page, it was the hottest topic being discussed there.

A tragic but passionate love story between an Elf and a certain Knight, that was.

< 33. Heroic (5) > Fin.

Chapter 120: Sorting Out the Feelings (1)

The origin of this tale was a post uploaded to the Dawn's forums by a Knight who just happened to be around to witness the final moments of Jin Seh-Hahn. The post itself was nothing but pure guesswork about the unrealistic love between an Elf and the fallen Knight.

And to make the matters a bit more worse than before, several Knights poured more oil to the flames – saying such things as an Elf frequenting Jin Seh-Hahn's home, etc, etc. And then... a gossiploving female Knight decided to 'sort out' all those little snippets of posts and ended up compiling a romance novel in the process.

And so, the two protagonists in this story morphed into full-blown lovers who were planning to get married soon.

This pure work of fiction was even being recommended by over 640 members of the Dawn Order – which was crazy, considering there were only around 800 Knights affiliated with it. In other words, it seemed like it was only a matter of time before this 'novel' would find its way to the hands of the public...

"This, were you aware of this?" (Sae-Jin)

Inside the coffee shop owned by TM.

Sae-Jin got bored while waiting for that ball/high-society party Yu Sae-Jung was suppose to attend, which he planned to sneak in and 'sightsee' later – or, more correctly, to spy on her – so, called up Hazeline who was living nearby to kill some time.

"Mm... Kind of." (Hazeline)

She calmly replied with a smile. She was as pleased as punch at being called by him out of the blue, but Sae-Jin's brows were deeply furrowed in a show of his unhappiness.

"Ah... Actually, I couldn't really deny it, and you'll see why I couldn't. Sae-Jung was asking me with such an ardent fervor...

How can I deny it when she texted me [I didn't know, Unni. I'm so, sorry] with this crying emoji?"

She pulled out her phone and showed the text in question to Sae-Jin.

"...Hmm."

For sure, it seemed that Yu Sae-Jung sent the text while under the heavy clouds of emotions. Did she send it right after reading those fictitious posts? However, there were a lot of typos. She must've sent it after having a stiff glass or two. Maybe more.

"But still, we shouldn't say Jin Seh-Hahn and Miss Hazeline were having a relationship, you know." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin said half-jokingly, but Hazeline nodded her head somewhat unexpectedly.

"No wait. That doesn't sound so bad." (Hazeline)

"Eh? No, hang on a minute. Please don't joke around. When reporters come around asking questions, please say it's all a misunderstanding." (Sae-Jin)

A question mark floated on top of her head as she tilted it in confusion.

"But why? It doesn't matter since Jin Seh-Hahn is dead, right?" (Hazeline)

"...Actually, it does matter, since I gotta tell Sae-Jung that I'm Jin Seh-Hahn sooner or later. You can probably imagine how awkward that conversation is going to be, right?" (Sae-Jin)

"Why would you tell her that?" (Hazeline)

"Of course I have to tell her. She's my girlfriend." (Sae-Jin)

""

Hearing his words, Hazeline quietly bit down on her lips. She remained silent after that, just tapping on the coffee table with the

tip of her finger. Five minutes, ten, then fifteen... some length of time had passed by, yet all she did was to continuously let out several heavy sighs.

"...Miss Hazeline?"

"Yes, yes. How nice it is to be Sae-Jung... After all, you're her boyfriend."

She finally said something, then loudly slammed her palm down on the table's surface, before roughly standing up. Sae-Jin shuddered a little, but since she still hadn't given him a definite answer yet, he too got up and chased after her.

"Where are you going now?" (Sae-Jin)

"I'm going to a place for dinner." (Hazeline)

"...With who?" (Sae-Jin)

"With you." (Hazeline)

In a show of confidence, she jabbed her forefinger at his chest as if she had already called dibs on eating out with him or something.

"What are you ta..."

"Didn't you say there's still plenty of time left until that party begins? Then, why not spend it with me?" (Hazeline)

"...No, wait a second here."

"Then, I'll give it a more serious thought, whether I'll deny the rumour or not."

Sae-Jin took a sneaky glance at his wristwatch after deliberating it for a bit. Thankfully, the clock hands still hovered around 5. But Hazeline powerfully snatched his wrist, and glared at him with a pair of chilly eyes covered by her hood.

"Are you coming or not?" (Hazeline)

"Ah, well, since there is still some time left, so..."

"Then, follow me."

Khwang, khwang, khwang

While still tightly gripping Sae-Jin's wrist, she stomped her way in a hurry.

Arriving next to his car before long, she grabbed the door handle and began an epic struggle to open it. But it didn't budge an inch, so she drummed on the door and spoke in irritation.

"Please unlock the door." (Hazeline)

""

Bleep

Sae-Jin chuckled slightly as he pressed a button on the car's key. That caused the car's door to open not sideways, but rise up to the sky.

"...Looks like you changed the car again. You must be loaded with money now." (Hazeline)

Hazeline complained audibly as she climbed into the passenger seat. Sae-Jin expertly slid into the driver's.

"Are we going to that place, the one we go to all the time?" (Sae-Jin)

"Nope. Not that one. Let's go somewhere else. There is this place I know." (Hazeline)

She suddenly accessed the car's satnav. The destination was only about ten minutes away – pretty close by.

"By the way..." (Sae-Jin)

"It's going to be fine. There aren't too many people there. It opens a bit later than usual, and as I frequent the place, I know it quite well. Even Sae-Jung's been there a few times before, too." (Hazeline)

"Oh. Well, in that case... Wait, what? Sae-Jung was there too? Why would she be there, in the middle of the night...?"

"She probably wanted to unwind and relax. For now, please get going already." (Hazeline)

"...Keum."

Vrrrroung...

When he pressed down on the accelerator, a throaty exhaust note filled the cabin.

And the sports car only needed three minutes to arrive at the restaurant. No, he thought it was a restaurant, but...

"...Isn't this a bar?!" (Sae-Jin)

"Yes, it is. I told you already, yes? That it opens its doors a bit late."

This was no bloody restaurant – instead, it was a stylish and luxurious bar.

"They also serve food. In fact, I'll make it for you."

She entered the bar first. Sae-Jin followed her footsteps with a slightly uneasy expression. He wasn't too worried, though – as long as Mana circulated within his body, he'd never get drunk anyways.

**

"Actually, this is the magic-infused liquor." (Hazeline)

The moment he heard Hazeline's words, all his confidence shattered into bits and pieces, only to be replaced by the feelings of uncertainty.

"You should have told me sooner..." (Sae-Jin)

"The motto here is 'drinks that can even get Knights drunk'. That's why, the bar's been named 'You Will Get Drunk'... Hiccup!!"

Thankfully, Sae-Jin was only at the level of feeling a bit tipsy, but in Hazeline's case, it was turning into a potentially serious problem. She had discarded her robe a long time ago and now it was nowhere to be seen, and her face was flushed crimson red.

"...Ah, d**n. Would you look at the time already? Looks like I must get going..." (Sae-Jin)

To be perfectly honest, he had no confidence when it came to alcohol. All the dangerous mistakes happened under its influences, after all.

"Mister Sae-Jin. There is something I must seriously talk to you about."

However, Hazeline grabbed his wrist again as he tried to get up. Her own hands were trembling, and her downcast eyes were moist. He had no choice but to sit back down. He consoled himself by thinking... all he had to do was avoid getting drunk.

"What... is it?" (Sae-Jin)

He sighed out and asked her.

Hazeline took another sip of her drink, and then, slowly moved her mouth. From between her wet lips, her trembling voice leaked out.

It sure was her trademarked beautiful voice no matter where it was heard, but Sae-Jin's expression was getting stiffer and stiffer as he listened.

The time now was late, late afternoon, the last lights of sun fading over the Western horizon. An ultra-luxurious cruise liner operated by TM was anchored off the coast of the now-calm East Sea. The sight of countless lights that glittered on deck, as well as many waiters kitted out in neat tuxedos, imparted the atmosphere with the air of great importance and high class even when viewed from afar.

As this was a party held biennially, the names on the guest list were indeed quite varied, to say the least. Some who hadn't been invited before had come, while some who had been invited before, were disqualified from attending this year.

"We welcome you aboard."

As the time for the ball drew closer, and the waiters busily greeted the newly-arriving guests – Sae-Jin in the Leviathan Form was swimming around the cruise liner under the water's surface.

Actually, this wasn't his original plan. No, he was going to attend this party as a human and surprise Yu Sae-Jung in the process. After all, his TM had entered the ranks of top 100 companies so he was more than qualified to do so.

However, after listening to the drunk Hazeline's words earlier today, his mind was in somewhat of a turmoil. She definitely did not confess to him. But he wasn't a completely hopeless half-wit who could not recognise the depths of her feelings contained within her voice, either.

"...A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Yu Sae-Jung."

It was then, he heard someone mention Yu Sae-Jung's name. Sae-Jin slowly opened his eyes and carefully swam closer to the surface.

He spotted Yu Sae-Jung on deck. It hadn't even been three minutes since she arrived, but hell, she was surrounded by quite a hefty crowd already. They were all rather good-looking men and women from the families of the top 100 companies.

They were trying very hard to appeal to her sensibilities, but unfortunately, she only flashed a polite smile to deal with them. Even then, not long after, she pulled the time-worn excuse of making a prior engagement with someone else and swiftly evacuated from there.

Sae-Jin slowly tailed her underwater. She seemed to be quite used to walking in high heels now. She made her way towards the railings overlooking the silent ocean and deeply gazed at it in contemplation.

She looked rather lonesome, standing there. So, Sae-Jin created a weak ripple on the surface for her. Yu Sae-Jung quietly closed her eyes as the salty scent of the sea and the gentle sway of the waves entered her mind.

But even that respite didn't last long. An unknown older gentleman was slowly approaching her.

Sae-Jin wasn't worried, at least not initially. He thought that, here comes yet another fool who will end up tasting the bitterness of embarrassment courtesy of Yu Sae-Jung. However... out of the blue, she formed an affectionate smile as if she was waiting for this man's arrival while turning around to greet him.

"...What the hell."

Momentarily, the sea swayed noticeably – the result of his unconscious reaction after losing his calm at this new development. She was greeting this unknown man with as much affection as she would show him.

Before he could lose his mind, though – Sae-Jin did his best to remain cool, and pushed both his sight and hearing to absolute maximum. The previously-dark view brightened up, and he could hear the conversation of the two on deck.

"And how goes your painting lately, uncle?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

The moment Sae-Jin heard these words, he truly felt grateful for that persistent slim strand of patience he held onto – if he had lost his cool and jumped aboard to intervene, then he'd been seen as a proper idiot by everyone by now.

"It's going well. You should come visit my gallery opening later on."

"Fuhut. Of course." (Yu Sae-Jung)

This man's face kind of resembled the calm ocean – vivid creases

on his face and the deep, dark navy blue hair seemed to be the reason for that.

"By the way, Sae-Jung. I've heard from the rumours doing the rounds that you've been dating Kim Sae-Jin."

"...Yes. We've been going out for a while now." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Yu Sae-Jung replied with a strangely lonely expression, which made Sae-Jin feel guilty, his body trembling slightly under the water's surface.

"But I didn't hear anything from the media?"

"No one would be daring enough to publish that story, without receiving our blessings in the first place. I mean, if you happen to cross both the Dawn and The Monster, then you wouldn't be able to set foot back in Korea, after all."

The man smiled slightly and nodded his head. Then, he turned his gaze back towards the ocean – as if to commit to memory whatever he saw lurking underneath the water's surface.

"I honestly never imagined that you'd actually start dating someone."

"...I was really conceited back then, that's why. I've grown up a lot after meeting Oppa." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"No, no. Not that. That's not what I meant, you know? Didn't you say you'd only marry me and no one else?"

Yu Sae-Jung let out a short chuckle as if she found his suggestion unbelievable.

"Just how long ago did I say that...? Seriously, uncle. You're making me laugh." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Hahaha. It's my sense of humour that attracted my wife. Probably."

"No wa~y. There's no way, methinks." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Two of them shared a warm laughter together.

But the smiles only lasted for a short moment. His face hardened slightly and studied Yu Sae-Jung's side-on appearance. He seemed worried for her.

"However... are you guys definitely in 'love'?"

"...Well, yes. I do love him. I've never felt like this before in my entire life, and I don't think I'll ever feel this way, ever again." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Yu Sae-Jung replied right away. Sae-Jin should have been happy hearing those words, yet... they felt like needles pricking his skin.

"But... Oppa's feelings, I think, aren't as clear as mine. Maybe, I love him a lot more than he does me. I mean, I'm just thankful for being able to have him by my side, you see."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. Therefore, I'm different from you, uncle. So, please do not worry about me." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"...I'd like to do exactly that, as well."

The man answered her in a calm manner.

There were no other words exchanged after that.

Within this silence, the two of them enjoyed this sense of comfortable familiarity shared between them.

With a good timing, a gentle wave swept by.

They stood there quietly and appreciated the beautiful reflections off the rippling surface of the ocean.

Four days later, Thursday.

There was a huge throng of Knights as well as reporters filling up the main auditorium of the Raven Knights Order. All these people had gathered for a 'small' event that would only last 5, 10 minutes tops. But this event was important enough to tug at their interest really hard – a weapon conferment ceremony.

Normally, such a ceremony only happened when a famous Knight bought something from a famous master Blacksmith. The Knights Order would hold it in order to advertise/boast that one of their Knights had purchased such a wonderful weapon.

However... the Raven Order had never held one until now, saying something or rather about their reputation and stuff.

The reason such a famous Order would voluntarily break out of their own tradition, was all because the master Blacksmith involved here was Kim Sae-Jin, as well as the rumour mill indicating that the rank of this new weapon could be a "Treasure".

"...Congratulations."

Inside the waiting room behind the auditorium's stage, the Raven Order's Master Kim Hyun-Seok congratulated Kim Yu-Rin while looking rather dispirited.

"What the... Your subordinate is acquiring a good weapon by getting into a heavy debt, yet you're getting jealous of her?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin jokingly replied to him while smiling slyly. Kim Hyun-Seok shook his head, his expression slightly showing his guilt.

"No, not true. I am truly happy for you. By the way, what's the name of this weapon?" (Kim Hyun-Seok)

"According to Guild Master Kim Sae-Jin, it's going to be Gungnir." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"...Gungnir, huh?"

The legendary Gungnir – the weapon of the leader of all the gods residing in Asgard, Odin. It seemed that Kim Sae-Jin dared to pilfer yet another name of a legendary weapon.

"But, isn't your main weapon a sword? Although I don't know the legend all that well, I'm sure 'Gungnir' is a spear of some kind."

"Ah, that is... Apparently, it's a sword that can substitute a spear easily. He said that it can fire several highly accurate light arrows that will work well along with my Trait." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"...Is that right? Hmph. So, it was tailor made for you."

Kim Hyun-Seok scratched his chin and mumbled in slight dissatisfaction. Kim Yu-Rin looked at that and giggled to herself. Her father could be the most stern-looking man if he wanted to, but sometimes, he did kinda look like a little boy and that sure was adorable.

"By the way... if we are talking about legendary weapons, which one is superior – Gungnir, or Gram?" (Kim Hyun-Seok)

"Uh, well, that is... Ah, it's going to start now. Shall we go?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Of course, it's Gungnir, thought Kim Yu-Rin as she chuckled inwardly, while leading Kim Hyun-Seok out the waiting room.

"Uh? Oh, yes. Let us."

Two of them opened the door and stepped onto the stage. At the same time, claps of the proud Raven Knights resounded within the auditorium.

As she waved her hands towards the audience, she found a literal treasure chest sitting pretty in the middle of the stage. Although her weapon was still hidden within that chest, she couldn't help but feel deeply affected by the overwhelming aura oozing off from it.

That's mine, all mine~~.

Totally entranced, Kim Yu-Rin floated like a butterfly towards the chest – figuratively speaking, of course. < 34. Sorting Out the Feelings (1) > Fin.

Chapter 121: Sorting Out the Feelings (2)

From this way and that, Kim Yu-Rin began studying the treasure chest covered in black sheet. No matter which direction she observed it from, she was certain of the fact that the powerful aura oozing out of the box was definitely coming off from a bona fide treasure hidden within.

Finally~, I'm going to be the second person in here ever to own a Treasure-grade weapon...

As she basked in the feeling of an endless contentment, suddenly the sword hanging by her hips entered into her thought process.

This high-ranked sword had been by her side for a very, very long time – the 'White Night'.

It was a reward bestowed unto her by the Raven Order when she became the youngest upper Mid Tier Knight in the history many years ago. She survived many deadly crises since then with it by her side, and saved just as many lives along the way as well.

In other words, this sword truly had a priceless sentimental value to her, the one that shared her history of sweat, blood and tears, as well as all those good and bad memories she experienced as a Knight.

"...I'm sure you'll prefer to spend the rest of your days in comfort inside a good museum."

She slowly patted her white sword and swallowed her saliva down, feeling the complicated emotions sweep over her. All those days she'd been fighting with the White Night in hand flashed by her mind like a roll of a film.

"Oh, oh. He's here."

A man stepped on to the stage while Kim Yu-Rin was busy sorting through her mixed feelings that was born out of her separation from the White Night. That man was naturally Kim Sae-Jin, wearing a smart suit that looked expensive but not too extrovert and eye-catching.

Several ladies – Knights, no less – in the audience began blushing noticeably at his entrance, while the male counterparts were busy dreaming up of ways to get close to him as they noisily cheered on.

Although he was met by all this wonderful reception, Sae-Jin was actually under quite a bit of stress lately, thanks to several worrisome developments of last couple of days. He forced himself to assume a stiff smile, as he approached the waiting father and daughter pair of Kim Yu-Rin and Kim Hyun-Seok.

"Nice to meet you." (Kim Hyun-Seok)

Kim Hyun-Seok reached out with his hand extended first. Kim Sae-Jin lowered his head in a show of respect and shook the older man's hand.

"It's my honour to meet the Korea's greatest Knight." (Sae-Jin)

"...No, actually it's my honour. After all, there is no one who is more accomplished than you in your age group, the 20s." (Kim Hyun-Seok)

"Not at all. With Miss Kim Yu-Rin standing right besides me, I'm not deserving of such a praise." (Sae-Jin)

"Mm? Ah. Knight Kim Yu-Rin has already entered her 30s now. She's not in her 20s anymore, haven't for a long time." (Kim Hyun-Seok)

Kim Yu-Rin's shoulders shook in visible shock at this unexpectedly fatal low-blow that was aimed squarely at her heart. Fearing that other Knights might have heard this completely thoughtless and unnecessary remark of Kim Hyun-Seok, she quickly surveyed the surroundings with a horrified expression clearly etched on her face.

Several Knights knew enough to tactfully lower their gazes when her eyes landed on them.

"...Why would you say such a thing in public?!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

She angrily confronted her father/boss with a really pissed-off face. It seemed that she was ready to kill him if it came down to that.

The sensitive topics of 'age' and 'weight' were incredibly prickly subjects to talk about for ladies, indeed...

"Hahah..." (Kim Hyun-Seok)

"I'm asking you, why did you say that out aloud? Would you feel good if I called you a 50-something geezer in front of everyone?!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Ahahahah..." (Kim Hyun-Seok)

Kim Hyun-Seok glossed over the teeth-gritting Kim Yu-Rin's angry mutterings and walked towards the treasure chest along with Sae-Jin. Because, now was the time for the photo op.

"Say cheese~~!" (Cameraman)

Sae-Jin forced out another smile towards the camera lens as he stood next to Kim Hyun-Seok.

With a soft click, a flash went off.

"We're going to take a couple more pictures, but will you be alright with that?" (Kim Hyun-Seok)

"Pardon? Uh, sure. I'm fine with that." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin inwardly thought, just how many can they possibly take? Can't be that many anyways.

Unfortunately for Sae-Jin, it didn't take too long for him to realise the errors in his lackadaisical judgement.

In order to show off the fact that the Raven "possessed two Treasures crafted by the world's best Blacksmith, Kim Sae-Jin", he had to take literally countless photos with many people.

It began with taking a couple with only Kim Hyun-Seok. Next,

with Kim Hyun-Seok and Kim Yu-Rin, then followed by Hyun-Seok, Yu-Rin, as well as other high-ranking officials of the Order. Next, with those same officials, sans Hyun-Seok and Yu-Rin. Finally, ones with all the respective captains of each of the Knight Teams.

If it was the Raven of the past, they would have never raised a fuss to such an extent. All this show of prestige wasn't simply because the Dawn had been chasing them down hard.

Due to the frequent breakout of the Monster-related incidents throughout the world and the subsequent dispatching of Knights to literally everywhere, the national borders that normally demarcated the operational jurisdictions of the Knights Orders became rather blurred.

The competition, in other words, now included the rest of the world.

Whatever the case was, Sae-Jin was feeling really terrible after taking so many pictures. And to compound his misery even further, his photoshoot partners simply had way too many things to say to him. To see them forcibly shoving their business cards to him for the umpteenth time, hoping to receive Sae-Jin's famed platinum card in return, it was becoming so...

'...Hell, we haven't even opened the d**n chest yet.' (Sae-Jin)

Inwardly feeling rather worried about this circus continuing on even after the unveiling of the weapon, Sae-Jin took the last photo and also, pocketed the 30th business card he received.

"And we shall begin the ceremony now." (Announcer)

As the conferment ceremony finally got underway, Kim Hyun-Seok and other unrelated parties climbed off the stage, leaving Sae-Jin and Kim Yu-Rin behind, as well as the lone treasure chest.

"I'd like to thank you for this incredible treasure..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"I haven't even opened the lid yet, you know? You can lavish it

praises a bit later, Miss Yu-Rin."

Sae-Jin smirked a little as he replied to Kim Yu-Rin. Before this, she said she preferred dolls over weapons, but hell, it seemed that a mere weapon was incomparable to a true Treasure even to her.

"Then, shall we take a look?" (Sae-Jin)

SFX for covers being pulled off

Sae-Jin lifted the veil off the chest. Immediately, the blinding light came out from the chest itself. Kim Yu-Rin nervously swallowed her saliva, wondering if the chest's price tag was just as eye-poppingly expensive as well.

"Ah, I'm asking this just in case... Have you gotten over your crush, Miss Yu-Rin?" (Sae-Jin)

"...Excuse me?"

Kim Yu-Rin woke up from her dazed staring of the chest and asked out in a shocked surprise. He smiled wryly and whispered to her.

"The Orc. The Hero Orc. You've gotten over it?"

"Wwwwhat on earth are you talking about?!?! It's not 'gotten over it' since there was nothing to get over with in the first place!!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

When Kim Yu-Rin suddenly cried out at the top of her lungs on the stage, it naturally drew the attention of the audience.

"....It never was like that. Really." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Feeling ashamed by that sudden outburst, she lowered her voice and whispered to him.

Of course, the Orc sometimes still appeared within her dreams – his un-Orc-like handsome face, his charming baritone voice, his broad and dependable back, and his perfect muscles, all of it...

"Such a thing never happened. Never." (Kim Yu-Rin)

It had been over 3 months since she last saw the Orc, so a certain sense of longing, a desire, to see him occasionally reared its head, but... Now, she was completely fine with it.

"Well, in that case, I am genuinely relieved to hear that." (Sae-Jin)

Kim Sae-Jin muttered so, as he opened the chest.

And residing within its cavity, there was a mystical, dignified weapon exuding a brilliantly blinding light that was hundreds of times purer than what the chest emitted just now.

Seeing that smooth, perfectly-formed shape from the scabbard all the way down to its hilt, Kim Yu-Rin was in a total daze – until, she spotted a peculiar little detail.

'That insignia.'

It was a certain tiny mark, a small engraving of sorts, that Sae-Jin would unconsciously leave behind when he was completely focused or immersed in the crafting process of a Treasure, or a Branded Goods graded 1st or 2nd.

...

She looked at that mark and recalled the Hero Orc's mace. She remembered seeing a very similar mark somewhere on the roundish hitting surface of his scary mace. She was dead sure of it. After all, she dueled with him hundreds of time already.

"You like it that much?" (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin asked her with a satisfied smile after mistaking her dazed state for something else.

Kim Yu-Rin quickly swallowed down her saliva and turned her gaze towards him.

Sae-Jin's smile remained etched on his lips, even when her questioning stare firmly landed on him.

[With this weapon conferment ceremony, the general feelings of the populace is that Knight Kim Yu-Rin has received the figurative 'Sky Piercer Halberd' and the only thing she now lacks is the 'Red Hare'. But what are you thoughts regarding this?] (TL: This is some obscure reference to the 'Romance of the Three Kingdoms. Not sure what the relevance here is, but there you go. If anyone reading this out there is a proper RoTK expert, do comment below. BTW, Red Hare is a horse. Go figure. Also, this horse and the halberd were both owned by Lü Bu.)

[Hahah... that is a rather apt description. However, in case of the Red Hare, or more correctly, a Griffin – I hear that the Raven Knights Order is also trying to lease one for the period of ten years... But in all honesty, it all depends on Kim Sae-Jin's decision, so it's not certain at the moment.]

[Is that so? Currently, if I'm not mistaken, it's only the Dawn Order who have successfully leased the Griffins?]

[Correct. Well, the Dawn have enjoyed the most friendly relationship with Kim Sae-Jin, so... I fear, no matter how much other Knights Orders try to win over his attention, they will be unable to surpass that unbreakable bond formed from the very beginning, when he was still struggling at the very bottom. On top of this, he had given a Treasure-grade sword to the Dawn's most recognised Knight, Yu Sae-Jung, for free. It's a whole different relationship to the Raven, whom he asked for money.]

[Oh-ho. I wasn't aware of that. Anyhow, it is truly a surprising thing – to think, that one single man can somehow influence the prestige of an Order as well as the status of a Knight. I mean, the Daebaek Order, who used to be a bit underwhelming to be called an important player, have grown in status and now they are threatening Goryeo's position in the rankings solely by maximising their relationship with Kim Sae-Jin, aren't they?]

[Indeed. It's not for nothing many civilians are calling that man the Saviour. For sure, that nickname did start off as a sort-of attempt to ridicule him because of his wonderful Trait, but now... Now, without Kim Sae-Jin and The Monster Guild, the nation of Korea would find itself in a very difficult situation. After all, TM has taken over 50% of the artifact, weapons, and potion markets by themselves now.]

Hazeline was currently lying on a jet-black bed like a corpse. For almost the whole week, the only activities she forced herself to perform were sleeping, waking up, check up on her phone, watch TV and when she felt hungry, eat something... She was living like a zombie.

It couldn't be helped, since she could recall that huge mistake she made under the influence of alcohol, whenever she tried to do something, causing her to regret it with all of her being.

She was always like this – failing to rein in her wild emotions and then, regretting like crazy over the resulting spilt milk.

Besides, although she tried her best to not to think about it, it proved to be an impossible task. Turning on the TV and there it was, Kim Sae-Jin's face, every single d**n day.

And when she heard about him giving Kim Yu-Rin a sword, that sort of made her feel disappointed as well. He hadn't even made a Wizard's wand for her yet.

".....Wow, I'm such an incorrigible idiot."

She shook her head hard and turned the TV off.

Her feelings towards Kim Sae-Jin, she had decided it would stay as nothing more than a favourable impression. But it was much more than that now.

And the biggest reason for that was her spending 3,4 times a week with Sae-Jin disguised as Jin Seh-Hahn. She was such an idiot to actively go and see him. She knew very well things would turn out this way, yet her reasoning got suppressed by her emotions and therefore, she couldn't stop. And so, her feelings

that had ballooned into something far more dangerous, ended up doing something terribly idiotic. Thankfully, it wasn't a direct confession or anything, but still...

- By the way, why did you have to kill off Jin Seh-Hahn? If he hadn't died, then I'd be able to stay with him, you know.
- I wonder, doesn't it get a bit stale seeing only one girl all the time? I hear all men feel that way. It's not too late now, you know? You can resurrect Jin Seh-Hahn with a poof, and then, and then...

"Kkyaaaack!!"

Too embarrassed to recall the final bits of her drunken utterance, Hazeline instead screamed her lungs out.

She still couldn't believe the fact that she had blurted out a total bull dust containing her 'legit' desires during the moment when her reasoning and logic had fled from her brain.

What an idiot, a nutcase, a $d^{*****}s$ – the enemy of all alcohol kind.

Hazeline started kicking and punching her bed until it was nearly broken, out of sheer frustration and regret, but before long, she was sneakily lifting up her phone. She accessed the app for private chatting and began spying on one of the profile pics there. (TL: Not mentioned specifically in the raw which app, but it's probably Kakao Talk. Seems to be everywhere in Korea...)

However, she tossed the phone away on top of the bed after a short time had passed by.

On the screen of the phone lying on the corner of her bed, was the profile pic of Yu Sae-Jung. It was a selfie of her smiling happily while leaning against Sae-Jin's shoulder.

"...I'm so envious."

Hazeline was totally envious of Yu Sae-Jung. She also felt angry.

For sure, she met Sae-Jin before anyone else. If she was more

proactive back then... Then, the person next to him would have been her, instead. She felt regret, anger, wronged, and disappointed.

"...I wanna see him."

She crawled on the bed towards the phone and pulled up someone else's profile image, enlarging it on the screen.

This time, a 'flawless' image of Sae-Jin filled up the entire screen.

It was now Spring.

Kim Sae-Jin went to speak to Kim Yu-Sohn.

"Nosferatu, you say?" (Kim Sun-Ho)

"Yes. I think I need to go and meet them, at least once." (Sae-Jin)

"...By yourself only?" (Kim Sun-Ho)

But it wasn't the old man, but his son. Sae-Jin nodded his head, and although Kim Sun-Ho was rather worried about this, after seeing his boss's determination, he couldn't do anything but to nod his head along as well.

"...Well, in that case, I'll send a couple of operatives out and look for their whereabouts." (Kim Sun-Ho)

"No, wait. I don't think that's necessary – there should be an information provided to us by an anonymous source not too long ago. You should ask Mister Yu-Sohn about it." (Sae-Jin)

In the past, there was that time when an anonymous source sent in a bunch of photos and coordinates of an underground village located within a mountainside, saying it was Vampires' hideout. However, seeing that Bathory and her cahoots were busy slumming it out in a hotel located inside the city limits, this hidden village was more than likely the sanctuary of Nosferatus, instead.

"I understand." (Kim Sun-Ho)

"Very good."

Sae-Jin nodded his head once more and got up to leave. Before he could, though, Kim Sun-Ho exhorted Sae-Jin with a certain grave matter.

"Ah, right. Guild Master, I've been receiving reports of Bathory woman being seen on the coasts of the East Sea quite frequently now. It seems that she hasn't given up, yet. There is a good possibility that she might personally get involved here, so... It might be prudent to stop swimming in the ocean as the Azure Dragon for now."

""

Sae-Jin let off an unhappy air at that moment. After all, he was planning to head straight to the sea and swim in order to relieve all the accumulated stress.

"...Oh, well. I'll do that, then." (Sae-Jin)

But what could he possibly do? That Bathory woman was supposed to be incredibly powerful – so, all he could do for now was to appropriately avoid her.

< 34. Sorting Out the Feelings (2) > Fin.

Chapter 122: The Wizard of Bangbae-Dong (1)

Sae-Jin felt like he was stuck in a rut of late.

His growth had slowed down to a crawl. No, more correctly, he lost his reason to grow. The very first goal he set for himself was to live like a human being. To eat three meals a day, to be able to smile and be happy, and at minimum, sleep with a roof over his head – that sort of a simple life.

In the past, he fought hard in order to attain this simple goal. He slept for less than six hours a day. He had no time for fun and games nor did he for love and relationships. And as he failed to get a good enough education, he lived like an idiot and was treated as one. Also, got cheated plenty of times as well.

But now, that was all but distant history. This world, which at one point seemed to have abandoned him for good, was now warmly embracing Sae-Jin. Unlike in the past, people were very much mindful of his presence, and the number of those who cared about him and sang his praises had increased by so much.

It was truly an enjoyable life.

However, he began to feel slight doubt in his heart as well. All those things he craved for, he was able to earn them: all the fame, prestige, influence, and financial muscle.

There was not one soul who hadn't heard of the three words "Kim", "Sae" and "Jin" in Korea. And the company representing his guild, "TM", jumped to the 33th spot in the rankings of Korean companies the moment it opened its doors for business.

The Monster Entertainment Agency had now over 200 entertainers, Knights, and singers affiliated with it, despite it only being in operation for a few short years. And these guys were the best of the best in their professions, too.

Plus, the rumours of a good treatment and great ability to do business had spread throughout the industry, making his agency an object of envy. Once, one of the managers in the agency told him that there was no need to scout for talents anymore, that people were calling them now, instead.

And, after Sae-Jin created many different 'versions', the Athany doll had become the artifact of the century. The Korean government passed a special law governing all matters related to Athany dolls, called 'Athany Special Law', and blocked the sale of the dolls to overseas recipients by Sae-Jin's Guild. They then took over the process for themselves. Of course, The Monster still retained the rights to sell the dolls within the country's borders.

Although it was indeed a questionable move when seen from the viewpoint of The Monster Guild, even Sae-Jin and Co. couldn't fight against the government's concerted efforts to regulate and keep big corporations in line. In the end, they acquiesced after receiving promises of reduction in taxes and such.

Now, the Athany dolls were being used as a trump card in foreign affairs-related negotiations. From what Sae-Jin heard, currently the dolls were being leased to those countries enjoying a friendly relation with Korea, or to those governments who they wished to be in one with. If the relationship soured for some reason, then the doll was promptly taken away.

He also heard that there were quite a few countries that feared the above example from happening and, although somewhat cowardly, were grovelling in front of the Korean government. Well, a couple of the Athany dolls had an attribute imbued that could 'decrease the chances of Monsters attacking', so there was that.

Just like that, the name 'Kim Sae-Jin' had transcended the borders of his native nation and spread out to the rest of the world.

However... the more his public persona grew larger and larger,

his own sense of self was slowly getting lost. He was like a tiny little boat floating aimlessly on a windless open sea.

His one true aim was to uncover the truth of his parents' deaths and to avenge their murders. But the truth about his father being a Mah-in, and his mother being in cahoots with 'Vampires'... well, the more he thought about it, the more doubtful he became, enough to even douse the flames of his anger towards Vampires with cold water.

"

He pushed away all these distracting worms of thoughts and took a glance to his side.

Yu Sae-Jung was gently and rather adorably snoring within his arms. But seeing her like this, Hazeline's face popped up in his mind, making him feel guilty as hell.

Just why did she say all those things back then? Sae-Jin closed his eyes, while trying his damnedest to ignore that feeling – the one he had understood to some extent already.

He couldn't sleep. Only dark thoughts continued to creep up into his head.

On a certain day, as the Spring was coming to an end.

Sae-Jin decided to focus wholly on training once more.

Well, it was because there was only one method left right now that could help him alleviate his stress. Currently, it was deemed inadvisable to swim in the East Sea – Kim Sun-Ho personally went there and took photos of a woman who seemed to be that Bathory, busy playing around near the beach and sent it over to him.

And he couldn't be bothered to head to the Yellow Sea or to the South Sea – he sure as hell didn't feel like fighting all those dumb sea Monsters who would definitely try their luck with him.

And so, he decided to focus on wielding 'Mana Body' more proficiently. After all, it was better to forcefully train and do something, rather than sitting around doing nothing because he had lost this goal, and let useless thoughts make him even stressed, instead.

Plus, 'Mana Body' was certainly the most awesome 'Skill' he possessed at the moment as well, so he should really power it up somewhat.

"....I heard that you wish to learn how to use magic?" (Johannsson)

The person assigned to help him train Sae-Jin's Mana Body – albeit unknowingly, of course – was a dude named Johannsson. A second-gen Elf Wizard, he was nominally a Korean by birth, but he more or less looked like a demigod from the Greek pantheon or some such.

"That's correct. I thought it might be helpful if I learned it." (Sae-Jin)

"Hah. Really now." (Johannsson)

However, Johannsson looked quite dissatisfied by something.

The Wizard Tower had sent in a famous Wizard as a tutor since it was Kim Sae-Jin who requested for one, but Johannsson was not liking this situation one bit.

The existence of a Wizard and an Elf combined together possessed biggest pride and stubbornness than anyone else. But he had to teach a complete noob about magic? If it weren't for the Wizard Tower insisting on it, Johannsson would've never came here.

"No, magic isn't a 'helpful if you learn it' kind of thing, like learning how to drive. If you're thinking of learning it as a hobby, I advise you to give up right now. Besides, you can't learn magic anyway. You see, wielding magic is a noble endeavor, a privilege only granted to those who have dedicated their entire lives to the pursuit of wizardry." (Johannsson)

Johannsson didn't shrink away from Sae-Jin. His tone of voice was confrontational, and the look of dissatisfaction in his eyes was heavy enough to crush a person. However, from Sae-Jin's point of view, he actually preferred a tutor to be like this.

"...No, well, uh... there's a possibility it won't be like that. I could have the aptitude like one of those unrivalled genius, am I right? I've got this Trait, you see." (Sae-Jin)

Wanting to tease the guy a bit, Sae-Jin became overtly chatty. At that moment, Johannsson's face crumpled like a discarded newspaper in a trashcan, and the colour of red began rising up from his white neck to the rest of his head.

"Hah, hah, hah. You, you're just too much. See, the thing is, Traits related to wielding magic are incredibly rare. You need to repeatedly study, train, and temper yoursel..." (Johannsson)

"I got it, I got it. For now, just fire a magic spell at me." (Sae-Jin)

"...What?"

Sae-Jin needed to get hit – in other words, be in contact with – for the Leviathan's innate Skill to activate and 'accumulate' the spell. Of course, that meant activating the Leviathan's Scales as well, but if he just activated it over the area of impact and then quickly disabled it, no one would notice it.

"What are you doing? Please fire one. I'd like to test the abilities of the instructor with this." (Sae-Jin)

""

Johannsson genuinely got pissed off from Sae-Jin's provocation, his white skin now dyed in the deep shades of crimson. On top of this, his shoulders were quaking from rough breathing, a clear sign of him barely suppressing his rage. "Please do hurry up. Are you worried about not meeting my standards? You don't have to fret over such a thing, you know?" (Sae-Jin)

These words finally shattered the 'pride of a Wizard and an Elf', and the sharp debris from the resulting destruction even managed to severe the lines of reasoning as well.

"Orya!!"

Johannsson let out a strange cry as flames formed on his hand. A coagulation of Mana, and billowing with hot winds, this ball of flame looked rather simple on the outside but was a different story altogether inside. That thing was the so-called 'white flame', where flames were compressed tightly, causing its temperature to rise up to an extreme level.

"....Ohhh."

Sae-Jin let out a gasp of admiration at this wondrous display. Unfortunately, Johannsson even found this leisurely attitude of Sae-Jin unacceptable, so he threw the ball of flames with a full-on killing intent.

SFX for a fireball rapidly flying

Causing shimmering heat haze as it flew, the white ball of flame slammed into the chest of Sae-Jin, and then with a loud Boom!!, it caused a huge explosion that shook the air.

"That was the 'White Flames', the most powerful of all fireballs."

Johannsson's anger had cooled a bit after this, and he explained it out loudly in a satisfied voice. However, there was no reaction beyond the dense smoke.

"...E, excuse me?" (Johannsson)

He cautiously called out.

There was still no reply.

Scared silly now, Johannsson hurriedly used magic to blow away

the smoke as cold sweat drops poured down all over his body. After his view had cleared up, he spotted Sae-Jin lying on the floor.

Johannsson got so shocked, his eyeballs nearly popped out. He quickly ran towards Sae-Jin's location and knelt down next to him. The huge wound on Sae-Jin's chest resembled a melted candle...

"M, Mister Kim Sae-Jin!! Wake up, please!!"

Johannsson shook Sae-Jin continuously but there was no reaction. In that critical moment, his life flashed by his mind. Was all the hard work and effort he put in the past as an Elf Wizard all going down the drain because of one moment's blinding rage?

SFX for uncontrollable giggle

Fortunately enough, Sae-Jin couldn't hold back his giggles anymore. Johannsson stared at him in a dumbfounded silence, before his face became crimson and...

"I shall be leaving now!!"

...He angrily screamed at the top of his lungs and stomped out of the training facility.

*

It took full 30 minutes before Johannsson could calm down from the furious rage that was caused by Sae-Jin's prank, and begin the tutoring session properly.

"...Fuu. This is what you call a grimoire, a book where a magic spell has been recorded."

Johannsson pulled out a certain book and spoke at the same time. This book was shaped rather strangely, however. Its size was as big as an encyclopedia, and its covers were equally thick as well, yet there were only 5, 6 pages in total, making it a rather slim book.

"These grimoires are truly valuable treasures that can fetch upwards of tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, or even millions of dollars. In this book, the magic I used earlier, the White Flames, is recorded. Now normally, civilians aren't allowed to look at it, but..."

Johannsson muttered that Sae-Jin would never learn it while he opened the book's cover.

"Mm?"

Betraying Sae-Jin's expectations quite nicely – he was expecting to see pages upon pages filled with equations and complicated words – the only thing he could see on the pages were large illustrations showing parts of the human anatomy and various blood vessels. There were strange arrows pointing to different directions within these drawings of blood vessels, as well.

"...What is this?" (Sae-Jin)

"This is a diagram for 'Mana circulation path'. A magic spell is formed when Mana is fused in a particular way, and you must circulate Mana according to this diagram in order to successfully fuse Mana and ignite the spell into life." (Johannsson)

"Aha."

Sae-Jin smiled and let out an exclamation. This was beyond his expectations. If this was the case, then there was no need for him to get hit by magic spells, was there? All he had to was to circulate Mana in his body according to the book to use magic.

"...However, it is not a cakewalk to move Mana within your blood vessels. That is where the 'chanting' comes into equation. With it, we're manipulating Mana, telling it to move this way, move that way, just like that. Not to forget, it's important to make sure a magic spell doesn't harm the caster. It's possible to lose one's life from his or her own spells." (Johannsson)

"So, that's how it is."

Sae-Jin ignored the Mana circulation path diagram and moved Mana around according to his own methods to recreate that White Flames spell.

For real, Mana began circulating similar to what the diagram was showing on the pages of the grimoire. However, as time passed, small differences crept up, and the end result became completely different.

Since a Leviathan circulated Mana in the most 'natural' manner, he couldn't be in the wrong – which meant that the grimoire's method was wong. If he followed the diagram, then the circulation of Mana would end up tangled in a mess, and leak out unnecessarily, to boot.

"Uhm, by the way, this... Isn't this a bit strange? Doesn't it feel like Mana is getting all tangled up? It feels so unnatural, you know?" (Sae-Jin)

"...Hah? What are you talking about?!" (Johannsson)

Johannsson let out a hollow chuckle. The coldness in his eyes took a step further from being confrontational, to someone who was looking down on a disgusting insect.

"This grimoire is one of the greatest works ever written by the honoured High Elf Wizard, 'Toraque von Reiheims. But you're telling me it's wrong? Hah. Hahaha. Aigoo. You're making me laugh here." (Johannsson)

"Oh. Uh... did the greatest Wizard ever write this grimoire?" (Sae-Jin)

For sure, a Leviathan and a human were obviously not the same. A Leviathan was the so-called 'omniscient creature of Mana' that could store and understand all things Mana, while humans could only artificially force Mana into their bodies. So, it was a given that humans couldn't imitate a Leviathan's way of wielding magic.

"Oh, in that case, many of the world's grimoires must contain quite a few errors and incorrect bits, then. No, hang on. Most of them must be plainly wrong." (Sae-Jin) However, he was currently in the 'human' appearance while storing Mana and understanding magic. In other words, not only the Elves but other people could very well follow his methods – the one which was far more naturally suited for the human's physiology.

"Now wait a d**n second here!!" (Johannsson)

Of course, Johannsson shouted out in rage, thinking that Sae-Jin's declaration was tantamount to dismissing the entirety of the Wizarding profession.

"Who the hell do you think you are, to dismiss all our..." (Johannsson)

Kim Sae-Jin decided that, instead of words, it'd be better to speak with actions to Johannsson who was about to burst a blood vessel or two from pure rage.

For starters, he demonstrated the White Flames as written in the grimoire.

"Well?" (Sae-Jin)

Seeing a sphere of white flames suddenly pop up over Sae-Jin's hand, Johannsson's jaw dropped to the floor. His mouth opened wide enough to shove two fists inside.

".....Uh...."

"However, this is too complicated and bothersome." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin snatched the grimoire off Johannsson's hands, as well as a pen stuck on the chest pocket of his robe.

And then, proceeded to scribble on the pages of a \$2.7 million book.

Johannsson quickly snapped out of his speechless daze and realised the graveness of this situation. He then shouted out at the very top of his lungs.

"WHAT THE F*CK?!?! NOOOOO!!"

Johannsson rushed in like a wild animal, but too bad, Sae-Jin only needed less than two minutes to complete his 'corrections', thanks to his wonderful dexterity.

"Ah.... ah... My... three years' worth of salary is..." (Johannsson)

Johannsson looked at the grimoire, now full of chicken scratches, and despaired on the spot. However, Sae-Jin simply chuckled on the side.

"Why don't you try it out? It should be much easier now." (Sae-Jin)

"....You crazy motherf*cker!!" (Johannsson)

Johannsson sprang up like a loaded gun and clutched Sae-Jin's collars while spitting out expletives.

"You!! Compensate me, right now!! Now!!" (Johannsson)

Johannsson's reasoning had crumbled to bits a long time ago. He cried out desperately but Sae-Jin simply carried on smiling while summoning forth yet another ball of white flames.

And this one was on a completely different level to the previous ball of flames. If the previous flame was akin to a bonfire, then this one's pure white, ultra-high temperature was as if someone poured a barrel of jet fuel on top.

At this blinding white light, Johannsson was pushed back and he tumbled down to the floor.

"Wh... what the hell..?" (Johannsson)

"What do you think? If you follow what I've scribbled there, your own White Flames spell will be like this as well." (Sae-Jin)

""

Johannsson silently studied the ball of flames crazily burning up above Sae-Jin's palm.

This... was completely impossible.

But Johannsson of now couldn't even think of this.

As the words implied, he was in a total daze.

"You can come closer to take a look, you know. I've made sure it can distinguish enemies and allies."

< 35. The Wizard of Bangbae-Dong (1) > Fin.

(TL: "Bangbae" is a name of a suburb in Seoul. "Dong" is a Korean word meaning 'suburb or a district', btw. It's not something rude, I'll have you know.)

Chapter 123: The Wizard of Bangbae-Dong (2)

The expression on Johannsson's face as he looked at Sae-Jin's ball of white flames was quite something else.

But his reaction was understandable. Moving Mana around the body according to one's will was a highly specialised skill set that one only acquired after repeatedly going through arduous training. It was not for nothing the Wizards were seen as true professionals.

But now, a man who had never ever received training nor education on how to wield Mana was, after taking one single look at a grimoire, somehow went beyond simply replicating it, he also corrected the apparent errors and advanced its grade, all at the same time. No matter how much his Trait helped him out here, this was just too...

"I told you, try it out at least once. Like this." (Sae-Jin)

As Johannsson stood there, busy escaping from the reality of the situation, a voice entered his ear canals. After waking up from his daze, he lowered his gaze downwards and saw a grimoire full of chicken scratches... no, rather, pages of content corrected with a red pen.

"Try it according to this diagram. The effect should be same as mine. Mister Johannsson is a great Wizard, after all." (Sae-Jin)

"...Ah, yes... Please, wait for a moment."

Persuaded somewhat by Sae-Jin's words, the still-dazed Johannsson began circulating Mana according to the 'corrected' grimoire.

Originally, 'White Flames' was a spell that appeared on the caster's palm after circulating Mana a few times through one's heart. Shockingly enough, Mana circulated far more efficiently and smoothly than before. Most of all, though – the density of

magical energy formed at the end of the process was... It was a lot more explosive than before.

"Well, what do you think?" (Sae-Jin)

Magic had two standards to judge its merits: 'grades' of the spells used, and 'strength of the aura' emitted when the spell activated.

Higher grade spells were obviously seen as high class magic to perform, while the skill and proficiency of the caster was judged by the strength and the vividness of the hue released by the aura emitted from the spell.

To explain, the difference in magic spells was the difference in their grades, while the difference between the same magic cast was the difference in the deeper hue of its emitted aura. Every Wizard was taught that the biggest factor in determining the 'aura' was the Magic Strength of its caster, the ability to control Mana at will.

""

That was why, Johannsson was even more speechless. He could not form one line of coherent thought inside his head, as he silently looked on at the hotly-burning ball of flame above his palm.

Hell, he wasn't even feeling the elation and satisfaction of advancing magic by another step forward. No, only questions bubbled up in his head. Without a doubt, his Magic Strength stat did not grow an inch. Yet, why was this ball of flames burning up so much hotter than before?

"Uh..."

"Didn't I tell you? My Trait is quite exceptional." (Sae-Jin)

Johannsson dazedly stared at Sae-Jin, the perpetrator of this unimaginable situation. All Sae-Jin could do was to scratch that itch behind his neck.

"For now... let's postpone the rest of the tutoring to a later date. I

have some unfinished work to attend to..." (Sae-Jin)

""

As Sae-Jin stealthily turned around to leave, Johannsson took a large stride forward.

"Excuse me, Mister Kim Sae-Jin!!" (Johannsson)

At his loud call, Sae-Jin's footsteps came to a halt. Johannsson alternated his gaze between the grimoire in his hands and Sae-Jin while carrying a determined expression, and then, handed the book over to him.

"Please, take this. This 'White Flames' is no longer the 'White Flames', and so, it's not the property of our Wizard Tower anymore." (Johannsson)

"No, thanks. I don't need it..." (Sae-Jin)

"Take it."

Johannsson forcibly shoved the grimoire in Sae-Jin's arms. Then, he stared at Sae-Jin who was feeling rightfully awkward at that moment, with a pair of passionate eyes and spoke fervently.

"And if it's at all possible... Can you lend us your power, to our Wizard Tower? No, it's fine if it's not just our Wizard Tower. The world of magic probably hasn't seen a genius like y.... Keheum. No, the world has been waiting for the entrance of an extraordinary Trait like yours. Plus, the number of Wizards specialising on attack spells have seen a noticeable decrease of late as well, because the difficulty of mastering such spells. And thanks to that, during the recent Monster incidents..."

Sae-Jin found it a bit difficult to understand everything Johannsson was firing out of his mouth. But he was sure of a couple of things. This guy wanted him to become a Wizard, and...

"Also, I, I would like to be your s, spokesperson or a middleman. I may look like this, but actually, I am one of the most promising

Wizards affiliated with the Seoul's Wizard Tower..." (Johannsson)

...He wanted to gain some benefits along the way.

"Hmm..."

Sae-Jin scratched his chin as he fell deep into a thought. He wasn't too keen on hiding behind the veil of anonymity, at least not at this very moment. Well, he got a lot of flak for that fiasco as the Orc Blacksmith, after all.

But as he stood there, looking at Johannsson busy yapping on and on about big contributions towards the world of magic, Sae-Jin couldn't help but think this guy was quite adorable in his own way. Plus, leaving behind a tangible 'footprint' for others to follow, in order to combat the upcoming calamity seemed like a...

"...Mister Johannsson. May I ask you where you live at the moment?"

"Excuse me? Oh, I, uh... live in Bangbae-Dong. But why....?" (Johannsson)

"Nah, it's nothing. Well, I'll sleep on it first. For now, have a nice day." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin smirked slightly as he saw Johannsson to the door. And in the hands of the leaving Elf, he was holding the grimoire of the White Flames – the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong Edition.

*

Grimoires were the most important assets for Wizard Towers.

They played such an important role, the rankings of a Wizard Tower and its reputation among its peers were determined by the number of grimoires in possession of the said Tower.

So, it was obvious that Wizard Towers would be especially strict on the upkeep of these grimoires, as well as on who gets to read them. Restrictions were placed on renting the books out according to a Wizard's grade, and once successfully renting one, the Wizard was forbidden from leaving the Tower with it until he or she returned the book.

However, those low-grade magic spells, such as Fireball, Ice Arrow, Haste, etc, etc, were deemed unnecessary to store in secrecy by the Towers and so, were available to the public and were even used as teaching materials in schools.

Although these people would rush in like a bunch of wild, crazed animals if a grimoire got leaked out of a Tower whether by mistake or through deliberate means, they still made an exception to these low-grade spells. The truth was, any learner wishing to become a Wizard would have mastered these spells by the age of 14 already.

"...Senior Sehmen, Have you seen this?" (TL: Yes, really. That's the name written by the author...)

Funnily enough, though – the spells that were garnering attention from various Wizard Towers at the moment were these low graded ones.

"What is it?"

"Here. It's a blog run by a Wizard whose not affiliated with anyone... There are corrected versions of Fireball's and Ice Arrow's grimoires uploaded on it."

"...Huh?"

The place here was the middle floors of the Korea's best Wizard Tower, Seoul Tower. This was an area where mid-ranked Wizards stayed while studying various magic as recorded within grimoires, or invented a new spell, or even researched new methods to utilise artifacts efficiently during many different circumstances.

"And why are the grimoires being corrected? No, wait. Which crazy idiot did that in the first place?"

The lowest-graded grimoires almost never saw any corrections. Not only was it a waste of effort to correct the errors of such spells, but from a long, long time ago, these weak-sauce spells were pretty much set in stone for the rest of the wizarding community anyways.

"I was thinking the same thing, but... it's a weird thing, this."

When the junior Wizard projected the blog in the air as a hologram, messy pages of a grimoire floated up. With several words carelessly written alongside the path of Mana's circulation, now it resembled more of a graffiti rather than an actual grimoire.

"..What the hell is this rubbish?"

Normal grimoires simply recorded the paths where Mana was to be circulated. And the individual Wizards were tasked with figuring out the correct chanting that personally suited them to get the Mana's flow right. It was a poor reasoning without a doubt, one of many inconvenient things found in the closed-off world of wizardry and magic.

"This Wizard wrote that this is a better way to circulate Mana... Apparently, it's become quite famous among the cliques of the newbie Wizards. I hear the 'F-grade' Fireball can display, at minimum, an E+, and at maximum, a D-, worth of power."

"...Haaah. What the hell is this scam now?"

The Elf Wizard named Sehmen slowly shook his head.

"But, dude. I don't care about noobs and civilians, but why the hell are you believing in this sh*t? Don't you know there are a lot of these quacks popping out everywhere lately? Besides, did you say he's unaffiliated? Can't you see that he's busy showing off, trying to get a little bit of fame so he can enter a good Wizard Tower?"

"Ah, the thing is, though... I tried it out just now..."

"What? You did?"

"Yes. I was thinking the same as you, Senior. But there was just way too many controversies surrounding this in our Wizarding community, so..."

"Okay, fine. So? Did it work as advertised?"

"...Yes. As I said before... it seemed that the spell's power increased by several grades."

Hearing this somewhat shocking admission from his junior, Sehmen crossed his arms and studied the hologram projection.

Reading the recommendations such as 'be more mindful here since Mana can spin around nonstop if you make a mistake', his nerves were slightly pricked, but still, he calmed his mind and then tried the spell out as it was shown on the diagram...

""

""

A ball of flames came to life. However, the powerful aura it was emitting was nothing to laugh about. Panicking at the ferocious flames that were busy licking the ceiling's paint, Sehmen hurriedly controlled his Mana and decreased the size of the Fireball. And this flame became a perfect round sphere that emitted a brilliant light as if it was a miniature sun or something.

"A, as expected of Senior!!"

The Junior Wizard let out a gasp of admiration at that beautiful light. Meanwhile, Sehmen gulped visibly before shifting his eyes back to the hologram of that blog page. His lips moved up and down silently. He must've been trying to memorise the address of the blog, unbeknownst to the junior Wizard by his side.

"Yeah, it is quite strange. B, by the way, you know who this Wizard is?"

"He's got a nickname. It's the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong. But no one knows his real identity. It has been only a week since he made his debut..."

"Oh, is that so? Anyways... is, is there a higher grade spell than

this one on the blog?"

Sehmen asked in a voice that said I don't need it, but I shall ask since that'll be rude to you, who have gone out of your way to introduce me to it.

"No. Only 'Ice Arrow' and 'Fireball', and nothing else. But really. Will he reveal the others for free like this? I mean, he'll probably sell it for good money to a Wizard Tower or monopolise it for himself."

"...Hmm, you think so?"

Sehmen took a deeper glance at the blog, and then sent a signal with his eyes to the junior Wizard as if he had come to a decision.

"What should I write here?"

The junior was quick on the uptake, so he clicked on the comment box.

"...Ask if he's got other spells. No wait. That's too obvious. Write, 'What a truly wonderful original method you have, sir. I can only admire you for having the bravery to express your thoughts on the matter which coincidentally, I had been dreaming of all along as well. By any chance, would you like to work alongside our Wizard Tower?' Okay, make sure you send it as a private message. Hey, dude!! I said, PM him, PM!!"

"Oh, my, my bad. I'll erase it and start over..."

Still clueless about the small-ish waves created by the two rectified grimoires he had uploaded as a sort-of trial run, currently Sae-Jin was holding a serious meeting with Kim Yu-Sohn.

"As you have suggested, that hidden village could very well be the sanctuary of Nosferatus. They are the only Vampire types that don't hunt humans, after all." (Kim Yu-Sohn)

"Hmm..."

"Are you planning to go there?" (Kim Yu-Sohn)

Sae-Jin was in a dilemma. If he wanted to find out why his mother was cooperating with with these Vampires, he had to go and talk to them. But he was rather fearful of the prospect – just what kind of shocking truth will he get to hear from them?

SFX for a mobile phone buzzing

The alarm on Sae-Jin's phone went off. When he took a glance, it was something like [A new comment has been uploaded on the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong's blog...]. Ignoring it for now, Sae-Jin concentrated on the documents Kim Yu-Sohn handed over to him.

The Nosferatu's sanctuary was located right on the boundaries of the Monster field, but there didn't seem to be any serious danger. Still...

SFX for a mobile phone buzzing

His phone went off again. Furrowing his brows, Sae-Jin simply chose to switch the phone into 'silent mode' as soon as he saw the words [the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong...]

"...What is it? A blog?" (Kim Yu-Sohn)

"Ah, yes. Not too long ago, I started a blog about magic out of curiosity. But it seems like most of the Wizards do not like what I've uploaded on it." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin chuckled slightly as he turned the phone's screen off, while thinking, Is it because I've made corrections willy-nilly?

"Well, they are famous for their stubborn pride, aren't they." (Kim Yu-Sohn)

"Haha..."

Sae-Jin just laughed it off and concentrated on the documents again.

"It should be better to arrive at the entrance with Mercenaries as escorts, right?" (Sae-Jin)

"Yes, sir. That's the point I'd like to talk to you about. More than likely..." (Kim Yu-Sohn)

The meeting between the two continued on.

All the while, the name of 'the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong' was slowly spreading within the communities of Wizards.

< 35. The Wizard of Bangbae-Dong (2) > Fin.

Chapter 124: Fading Skeins of Thread (1)

On an early morning of a certain day in April.

Hazeline was walking towards The Monster's HQ for the first time in a long, long while. She convinced herself that she was simply out on a stroll, but the truth was, she couldn't muster up the courage and give that man a call, so she was hoping to borrow the power of divine intervention.

"...Hmm?"

Now that she was here, though, she noticed that not just the HQ building but the entirety of the Guild's grounds seemed to have changed a great deal. The vast site of the Guild already boasted a stunning scenic view, but there were five or six brand-new monolithic megastructures that she hadn't seen before, and so, she didn't know which one she was supposed to enter. And there were lots of employees surrounding her, all of them arriving for work as this was still an early morning.

She hesitantly stood there amidst the busily-moving bodies of the employees, before slowly approaching one of the buildings where the most of the crowd was headed off to. She could sense a dizzy spell trying to trip her up just now, what with being surrounded by so many people like this, but somehow endured it as she walked up to the entry gate.

It looked like she needed to use an employee's card here; wondering for a bit, Hazeline carefully fished out her Guild membership card and pressed it onto the sensor.

It was then, a loud, automated voice of a woman came out of the speakers, saying, [Miss Shenarine, the Guild member].

'The Guild member'. Those three d**n words.

Almost immediately, noisy and lively entrance hall became dead silent, and the eyes of the surrounding people gathered towards

her.

""

Hazeline froze up like a statue in the very posture of pressing the card to the sensor.

Although their gazes contained the feelings and emotions of envy as well as admiration, she was still very much frightened by the fact that their attention was focused solely on her. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to call this a severe case of agoraphobia...

"Miss Shenarine?"

A female employee approached Hazeline, whose head had simply blanked out.

"Ye, yes. I'm Shenarine. P, please save me." (Hazeline)

Even her tongue had frozen stiff. The female employee tilted her head at this sight.

"Ah... This is TM's HQ building, ma'am. You can still enter it if you wish, but... By any chance, are you looking for the Guild's HQ, instead?"

"Yes, yes, yes. Right, that place." (Hazeline)

Hazeline pulled the hood down much lower and stuck right next to this employee. It couldn't be helped, since there was no one else to rely on except this woman. The employee seemed to be a bit flustered, but still, she made some calls and then brought Hazeline outside the building.

"It's over there."

After walking for about five more minutes, they could see the Guild's building. Thankfully, it was rather quiet around here. Letting out a huge sigh of relief, Hazeline finally released the iron vice-like grip on the female employee and lowered her head.

"Thank you so much. I did come here before, but... Everything had changed a great deal." (Hazeline)

"Oh, no. It's alright. If you need a guide again, please don't hesitate and give me a call."

Hazeline hurriedly pocketed the business card of the female employee and entered the Guild's HQ. There was only one person present, a receptionist, behind the counter in the spacious lobby.

Ji—

Hazeline immediately glared at the receptionist. Seeing the pointy tips of the ears, she seemed to be an Elf as well.

She seems way younger than me, so she should appropriately show some respect without me telling her, right?

As she continued to shoot the glare filled with her own little delusional thoughts...

"Wah, today's training was so tough."

"But still, this much is on the easy side, you know?"

From the passage to her side, accompanied by noisy chattering, a group of Knights walked out, their hairs still moist. It was a group of five women, and besides Yu Sae-Jung and Yi Hye-Rin, the other three were new Guild members.

"Uh? Unni? What are you doing here?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

Hazeline was turning around to escape the moment she saw Yu Sae-Jung's face, but too bad, Sae-Jung recognised her first and greeted her.

"Ah..." (Hazeline)

"She is one of the founding members, Wizard Shenarine." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Yu Sae-Jung made introductions to everyone as Hazeline began panicking inwardly. Then, with a brilliant smile, Yu Sae-Jung took Hazeline's hand.

"Shall we go and eat together? The cafeteria here makes great

*

After she was 'dragged' into the cafeteria in a daze, Hazeline found it difficult to acclimatise to this noisy atmosphere. Just how could they be this chatty with one another? Her ears might bleed the following day from all this yapping...

"Ah, that's right. Miss Shenarine, by any chance, do you know who this Wizard of Bangbae-Dong is? I've never seen a commotion quite like that one before. I hear that scouts from overseas Wizard Towers are scouring Bangbae-Dong, trying to find him."

"Ah... I also have no idea who that could be. It feels like a famous Wizard pulling a fast one, but... But I've turned my back on the wizarding world some time ago." (Hazeline)

The Wizard of Bangbae-Dong was one of the 'hottest' Wizards currently in the Korean peninsula. And the reason for that was simply because as a Korean Wizard, he got mentioned by the international media. It was like, [Grimoires that are perfectly corrected – just like how it was with the world of Alchemy, will there be another Korean Wave in the world of magic as well?]

"That's how it was... But it's okay for you to speak less formally, you know! It's fine for you to not use honorifics, since you're so much older than us."

"..." (Hazeline)

Hazeline really wanted to tell this girl to shut the hell up.

"Ah, right. Uhm, by the way, Unni... Is it really... no? With Jin Seh-Hahn?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

However, Yu Sae-Jung, who was definitely not a Wizard, had something else in her mind.

Jin Seh-Hahn.

Although more than a month had passed, he was still a big topic

of discussion among the populace. Hell, it seemed that people would still talk about him even after a year later, what with the martial art school that took after his name, 'Jin Mudo', now having over ten thousand disciples, as well as the UN creating a special award called 'Jin Seh-Hahn: The Hero of the World'.

"No, really, it wasn't like that. We were... just close." (Hazeline)

"Ah... really?"

"Ng. But, still..." (Hazeline)

Seeing Yu Sae-Jung looking disappointed for some reason, Hazeline decided to add in a couple more unnecessary words.

"But I still liked him, a lot." (Hazeline)

""

Suddenly, the lively atmosphere cooled down rapidly. Since this wasn't what she wanted, Hazeline quickly waved her hands around while smiling awkwardly.

"No, no, I'm just kidding. Besides that, Sae-Jung, did you... get a ring already?" (Hazeline)

Hazeline was busy searching for another topic to talk about, but even she realised her own mistake as soon as the words left her mouth. She shouldn't have asked this, for her own sake...

"Oh. Yes, Oppa gave it to me." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Wow. Really? It looks so expensive!! How much was it?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

While Hazeline was swallowing down the bitterness in her mouth on the side, Yi Hye-Rin was busy raising a fuss.

"Actually... he personally made it for me. There's only one like this in the whole world." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Seriously? Oh, my, gosh!! So envious of you right now!! That's an artifact, though, right? What kind of effects does it have?"

"...Well, it improves the skin and smoothes out the wrinkles." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Heok."

This 'artifact' ring certainly possessed one of the most fatal effects for the women folk...

Hazeline quietly bit down on her lips while listening to the conversation. She wasn't being overwhelmed by negative thoughts, such as I also want one like that.

'But I'm the oldest here, though...'

...Well, some part of her felt like that, but it wasn't everything.

Something was rising up inside her. Could it be frustration, anger, jealousy or envy? Or maybe, all of the above?

"Oh, really? Mm... So that's how it was. But, did you know?" (Hazeline)

Hazeline put the spoon down on the table with an audible tap.

"The one who met Mister Sae-Jin first was probably me? When he literally had nothing, it was me who borrowed him 5 million. Back then, he pretty much relied only on my help all the time..." (Hazeline)

No one asked her to say this, yet Hazeline really, really wanted to let this one out of her chest.

Other Knights nodded their heads and went, Oh, so it was like that, and thought nothing much of it, but Yu Sae-Jung was different. She furrowed her brows and then spat out her reply.

"...When?"

"It was probably... before Mister Sae-Jin became a Hunter?" (Hazeline)

""

It was way before Yu Sae-Jung's time. Biting her lips, she

desperately rolled her brain into gear. And finally, something did come up.

"I also met someone who resembled Oppa back when I was really, really young, you see? I think I was 7 or 8. It was 14 years ago, in terms of yea..." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"But that was someone just resembling him, though. Please, stop demeaning yourself." (Hazeline)

""

Two of them glared at each other with hotly burning eyes.

"Well, still. It doesn't matter who met who first." (Yu Sae-Jung)

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"What matters the most is, who's standing beside him now." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Hazeline's eyes began twitching, out of the blue. The newbie members cautiously studied this rapidly worsening mood between the two of them, and decided to quietly vacate their seats. However, Yi Hye-Rin stopped them. Her reasoning was that, it was always better to share such a fun development with other people.

**

At the same time when Hazeline and Yu Sae-Jung were waging a psychological warfare against each other...

Kim Sae-Jin stepped into the lush, verdant mountainside with two Mercenaries by his side. Breezes caressed the still mountains, causing the leaves to rustle; every now and then, sounds of wild animals growling could be heard.

And within this pristine land where there were no traces of humanity, Vampires were in hiding. Sae-Jin turned his gaze towards the Mercenaries, feeling slightly worried. Since he wanted absolute secrecy, he only brought two Mercenaries along. A man and a woman, they were the best of the best from the Company,

personally selected by Kim Yu-Sohn for this job. They were more than qualified enough to act as his guides.

"...I'll leave the guiding to you guys." (Sae-Jin)

At Sae-Jin's command, the female Mercenary called Rejen took a large stride forward.

"Please follow me."

Sae-Jin followed behind her large, confident footsteps, while the male Mercenary guarded their rear.

And the place beyond the still forest, where Sae-Jin stopped after ten minutes of travel, was...

SFX for chilly winds blowing across

...It was a seriously scary-looking precipitous cliff.

"What the heck is going on here..." (Sae-Jin)

Suddenly, Sae-Jin recalled a certain urban legend about satnavs inadvertently leading people towards deadly cliffs. When he glared at the two escorts with questioning eyes, they hurriedly shook their heads.

"All you have to do is to get to the bottom of this cliff. It might be difficult for regular civilians, but it should be perfectly doable for you, Mister Sae-Jin." (Rejen)

Rejen made her excuse and stood on the cliff's edge.

"I'll stand guard here."

The male Mercenary spoke out this time. Thinking that only this guy got the easy job, Sae-Jin shot him a look of discomfort. However, the male Mercenary feigned ignorance and cautiously avoided making eye contact.

"...So, I must really jump down from here?" (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin peered over the edge while voicing out his doubts. It sure was steep, this cliff. It was so deep that he couldn't tell whether

there was a solid ground at the bottom, an ocean, or even a pit of flames down there.

"Will you be able to make it? Do you need any assistance?" (Rejen)

Rejen asked in a worried voice.

"No, uh, it's fine. I can... make it alone. I think." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin breathed in deeply and peered over the precipice once more. But, it still was a steep cliff, still giving him a strong case of vertigo. Plus, there was a powerful wind blowing up from the bottom, too...

"Should I help?"

Rejen asked him again.

"...H, how will you help me?" (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin reluctantly decided to concede to the reality of the situation.

"Hold on tight." (Rejen)

Rejen wrapped her arms around Sae-Jin's waist without a single change to her expression. Only then, Sae-Jin spotted a pair of animal ears hidden under her hood. Oh, she was a Soo-in.

Unfortunately, all unnecessary thoughts regarding her race was cut short.

Well, even before Sae-Jin could get ready, she jumped like a cute kitten over the cliff, while still holding onto him.

"KKYAAAAHHHH...."

A somewhat pathetic scream of a guy echoed around the cliffside. The male Mercenary slowly approached the cliff and peered over the edge, before he...

"Whew..."

...Rubbed his chest down while breathing out a healthy sigh of

*

"...Fuu."

Holding his still-dizzy head, Sae-Jin got up on his unsteady legs. Thanks to calling forth his reserve of Mana before it got too late, he didn't suffer any external injuries.

"So, where are we going next?" (Sae-Jin)

"Over there." (Rejen)

At the place Rejen pointed at, there was a plentiful suspicious-looking piece of weird but huge boulder blocking a small corner of the cliff's face. There was no need to accuse them for being way too relaxed with their 'security', though. After all, even the 'condition' of the entranceway was rather scary dangerous already.

Sae-Jin gulped down on his saliva and approached the boulder. That's all he did. However, even though he didn't do a thing, with a noisy grumbling, the boulder slid inside the cliff and revealed a passage.

...

He took a glance at his back and saw Rejen without her hood studying the interior of the passageway with lots of interest.

"Let's go together." (Sae-Jin)

"...But can I?"

"Yes. But, please don't interfere while I talk to them."

Well, seeing that they opened the door without asking, it meant they were probably willing to have a chat with him. Rejen nodded her head and with light, airy steps, entered the passage first.

Inside the passage was dark and surprisingly lengthy. And the further they walked in, the stronger the smell of blood got. But, rather mysteriously enough, this smell was somewhat different

from every other Vampire Sae-Jin encountered before. It was a bit hard to explain why.

"...Someone's coming." (Rejen)

Rejen was leading the way, but she stopped in her tracks with her ears standing stiff, then she raised her arm and blocked his progress.

"Who's there!!" (Rejen)

A cry like a wild cat from her, and a shape of a person covered in a thick robe rose up from the darkness.

And it was a Vampire. Unbeknownst to him, Sae-Jin began gritting his teeth. However, this Vampire leisurely studied the two and slowly began speaking.

"...It has been a while."

A while? Sae-Jin tilted his head.

"What do you mean by that?" (Sae-Jin)

"Oh. Ah, my apologies. I mistook you for someone else."

""

Someone else. Probably meaning Sae-Jin's father.

"In any case. We have been waiting for you. Are you willing to follow me in?"

Sae-Jin quietly glared at this figure, and then...

"..Sure." (Sae-Jin)

...He slowly nodded his head.

< 36. Fading Skeins of Thread (1) > Fin.

Chapter 125: Fading Skeins of Thread (2)

It turned out, only the entry requirements were strange, and the place this unknown Vampire led Sae-Jin and Rejen into was a warm and normal house found in any typical countryside village. There was a comfortable couch set and a nice little coffee table in the living room; in the kitchen, a pot was quietly simmering away while a delicious aroma wafted out from it.

"Please, take a seat," said the Vampire while taking off the robe.

And Sae-Jin was surprised slightly. The gloomy and vague voice coming out from the robed figure definitely belonged to an old man, but the revealed face was that of a stunningly beautiful woman.

When the ash-grey coloured hair and pale white skin were added to that gorgeous facial features, he even felt a certain mysterious attractive charm that was uniquely a part of this non-human being.

"It's an enchanted robe. It's possible to manipulate body types, voices, as well as wrinkles on the lower part of the face with this robe."

His questions got answered pretty quickly. The Vampire leaked out a small grin before heading off to the kitchen to serve the guests.

"Would you like some tea?" (Nosferatu Vampire)

Sae-Jin took a glance towards Rejen. She hadn't said anything until now, but it was enough to understand her intentions after seeing her ears twitching and her nostrils flaring involuntarily. She was saying, Gimme that nice-smelling tea already!!

"We would." (Sae-Jin)

He had to ever-so-slightly wonder whether it was smart to have a nice, relaxing cup of tea in this place, but then again, he thought it

should be fine since he didn't sense any type of hostility coming from this Vampire.

"Alright, please wait for a moment or two."

Three minutes later, the female Vampire returned with a tray carrying three cups of tea.

"This is a type of tea that doesn't exist in our society, so we very rarely drink it."

Almost immediately, Sae-Jin stopped just short of taking the first sip. If it's something that didn't exist among this particular Vampire society, that could only mean...

"It's not blood, so you can relax and drink it."

"...Keum."

Somewhat embarrassed now, Sae-Jin quickly took a sip. It was unexpectedly delicious. It was perhaps even more so for Rejen, since her tail began to sway side to side ever so gently, as if a mountain breeze was blowing around here. Sae-Jin had the urge to reach out and pat that thing.

However, he knew well enough this wasn't the right time enjoy such a relaxing tea time.

He put the cup down and hardened his expression.

"By the way. Don't we have something else to discuss first?" (Sae-Jin)

"...Yes. Actually, we've been waiting for you." (Nosferatu Vampire)

Sae-Jin took a glance at the calendar placed on top of the coffee table. There was a cute little circle drawn over today's date, 4th of May.

'Did they know beforehand I am coming here today?'

"Allow me to introduce myself first. My name is Lillia von

Nosferatu. I am in charge of this sanctuary," said Lillia, as she met Sae-Jin's gaze head-on.

Her eyes were the colours of blood, just like every other Vampire. But, unlike them, there was overflowing vitality present within those eyes which made him think of a pair of vivid rubies instead.

"We, the tribe of Nosferatu, wish to cooperate with you, Mister Kim Sae-Jin." (Lillia)

Her attitude while saying these words out aloud was quite relaxed and laid back. Since this was something Sae-Jin had been expecting, he didn't show a big reaction, either.

"Your reasons are?" (Sae-Jin)

"It's simple. Unlike other Vampires, we're quite satisfied with living on this planet." (Lillia)

"...Did you coax my mother like this, as well?" (Sae-Jin)

A really faint smile stealthily crept up on her lips.

"Not really. She... personally saw the future." (Lillia)

"What do you mean by that?" (Sae-Jin)

"You'll learn its meaning later on, by yourself." (Lillia)

""

What a puzzling thing to say. He couldn't understand what she was trying to imply there.

"I've no idea what the heck you mean by that, but... You sure about cooperating with me?" (Sae-Jin)

"Yes."

"Then, spit it out. Tell me everything about what Vampires are planning to do. Also, what types of underhanded methods they are going to use." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin crossed his legs and leaned back on the couch in a slight display of arrogance. However, Lillia didn't seem to be offended by this and she simply continued on.

"Firstly, I hope you know what a Fissure is." (Lillia)

"The gap, a space, between two worlds." (Sae-Jin)

"Yes, correct. However, when a Fissure opens past to a certain extent, it changes into a portal of sorts. This portal is a separate, unstable miniature world, created when two planes of existence meet and intermingle. Inside this portal, the fabric of space and time loses all meaning, and is completely tangled up in a mess. Other Vampires are planning to use this portal to return to their former world – or, more correctly, return to the past version of their former world." (Lillia)

"But what are they hoping to achieve by doing that? Even if they do return to the past, isn't that world still facing the destructio... Ah?!" (Sae-Jin)

A lightbulb went off inside Sae-Jin's head. Lillia lightly nodded her head.

"Yes. They are hoping to return to the past and stop the end of the world from occuring in the first place. But, the odds of their success are simply far too low. Too long a time has passed by, and that plan won't succeed anymore. It's nothing more than a perverse obsession of the foolish Vampires who are in denial about their rapidly fading chances of success." (Lillia)

Lillia stopped talking and sipped her tea.

"However, we, the Nosferatus, are different from them. We have already come to accept the reality of the situation. Already, we..." (Lillia)

She stared at Sae-Jin with her eyes wide open. It was as if she was trying to recall the fading memories of her past through him.

"...We have seen many things, heard many things, and crucially... have met the 'saviour', too." (Lillia)

Even before Lillia could finish her sentence, Sae-Jin activated the Eyes of the Wolf. Her shoulders quaked visibly when she saw his irides suddenly narrow to a slit. She instinctively sensed a specific, species-unique terror in that moment.

"You aren't lying, that's for sure." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin couldn't spot any hostile intentions from her. All he could spy on, was her desire to continue living in this current world.

"Alright. In that case, what should we do to bring about the end to their schemes?" (Sae-Jin)

""

Lillia produced a worn-out notebook from her inner pocket. There were fading letters visible on the corner of this book that read, "....diary..."

"It's not possible to stop the portal from opening up with what this world possesses in terms of battle power. That is why, we need to increase the military strength of the world, and prepare to match what the incoming situation will potentially bring." (Lillia)

She pulled out a crooked piece of a scale from the pages of the notebook. Seeing this, Sae-Jin's eyes widened in shock.

"Hey, that thing is..." (Sae-Jin)

"But before all that, there is something we need to do now – to get rid of the biggest stumbling block in our immediate future – to kill Bathory." (Lillia)

Lillia placed the scale on the coffee table. He was right. Although it was dried up and didn't look too impressive now, seeing that colour of the ocean still reflecting off of it, without a doubt, this was the scale of a Leviathan.

"Please, take this with you. If you swallow this when you encounter Bathory, you will attain enough power to defeat her."

(Lillia)

Sae-Jin forgot to say something. If they knew about this scale, then that meant she, or maybe even the other Nosferatus, knew about his Trait as well.

"However, there is a chance that this one alone won't be enough, so..." (Lillia)

Lillia then produced a crystallised stone of some kind. It was a marble-shaped item, and strange Mana could be felt undulating from both inside and outside.

"Please, allow us to aid you when you're going to 'restrain' her." (Lillia)

There was a thin line curving upwards drawn on her lips.

The body length, 2.3 metres. The body weight: undeterminable, due to the scales that were harder than the finest mithril densely covering his body.

Normally, resembling a puppy dog with ears pressed back, but when frowning, rather scary to look at. Currently, referred to as the Azure Dragon, or as the guardian of the East Sea. Also, the object of worship after a new cult called 'The Blue Dragon of the Endless Oceans' was created not too long ago.

...This was the resume of Kim Sae-Jin the Leviathan. The world was deeply interested in the rapid, daily growth of the Leviathan. It was to the extent that when the Azure Dragon hid itself from the world for a bit, the government formed a special investigation team called 'Azure Dragon Observation Team' to find out why.

Splash, splash, splash...

At this very moment, Sae-Jin was swimming in the sea after what seemed like ages. And right by his tail, a lone bat was busy flapping its wings and openly followed him. It seemed that, this little thing was either the Bathory woman's 'tool', or some sort of a pet.

'That Bathory girl wishes to make the Azure Dragon her pet. However, since her lackeys failed the last time, there is a big possibility that she won't entrust the capture to her people and personally take action. You need to seize that chance.'

After recalling Lillia's words, Sae-Jin deliberately shook his tail and splashed around as if he was playing around. He even tried to shake his a*s a bit – since, that seemed like a sure fire way to make Bathory do something, anything, even if it's her swallowing down her saliva or some such.

'She's not coming, though...'

But as if she was exercising caution, or maybe even her subordinates desperately stopping her, unexpectedly Bathory did not show up. Only people he ran into, were a bunch of cameras from a cruise full of tourists, and a couple of deep-sea fishing yachts.

"Hmm."

It seemed that today wasn't the fated day. Sae-Jin winked at a certain blonde Elf lady who was busy taking his pictures and dived underwater.

*

At the same time.

"Ah!! Look, look!! It's gone!!" (Bathory)

Stomping on her feet repeatedly, Prillani Bathory couldn't endure it anymore and let out an exasperated shout. The scene reflected on the surface of a crystal ball in front of her showed a calm surface of the ocean.

"I should've gone there!!" (Bathory)

"...There are just too many witnesses in the East Sea, my lady.
That is why..."

"In that case, you should have carried out your job properly back then!!" (Bathory)

As a Monster enthusiast, Bathory found it very tough to get a hold of herself after seeing the much-more cute and coquettish Yong-Yong which hadn't been seen for almost the whole month. That 'name' was personally created by Bathory herself.

She so desperately wanted to bring Yong-Yong home and pat that chubby rear immediately...

"My apologies."

"Do you think I'm trying to fulfil some selfish wish of mine or something, huh? I'm only doing this, because when we tame Yong-Yong, our plans will become so much smoother to carry out, you know? Seriously, Yong-Yong is hundred times better than those useless Boss Monsters that get killed as soon as they appear...."

Afterwards, Bathory continued to grille her underlings for another hour or so. No matter how many times the hapless goons kowtowed and groveled before her, her hysteria didn't want to die down. However, without this lone hobby of hers, there would be nothing left to appease her boredom, other than wanton destruction and sadistic torture...

[The Wizard of Bangbae-Dong has declared on his blog that he will publish the corrected versions of the grimoires containing the "C-grade" spells "Shadow Conversion" and "Reflection Glass" very soon.]

[He initially said he will favour the Wizard Towers based in Korea when he's going to sell the grimoires, but now, it is understood that several overseas Wizard Towers are fiercely opposing this.] [Also, the son of the High Elf Wizard Forden who are credited with inventing the original spells, Crystel Forden, is enraged by the fact the spells created by his ancestors are being changed without the family's approval and thus is seeking appropriate compensation....]

As soon as Sae-Jin stepped into his house, he heard these words from a news programme, coming from the TV. He groaned slightly as he entered the living room.

"Oh, Oppa, you are home?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

Yu Sae-Jung was focusing on the news – probably because, it was about the Wizard that was making a lot of waves of late.

"Why would a Lady Knight pay so much attention to a measly Wizard, I wonder?" (Sae-Jin)

He spoke leisurely and pulled Yu Sae-Jung into an embrace.

"Well, I might be a Knight, but I'm also the only child of the Dawn, you know. I can't afford to miss news stories like this." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"...But, doesn't the Dawn's intelligence guys know all of this already?" (Sae-Jin)

"But that's from the Dawn's perspective. With news programmes, you can find out what the public thinks." (Yu Sae-Jung)

It was then, a graceful middle-aged Elf lady showed up on the TV screen. It seemed that it was time to interview the expert on the matter.

[Colleen Rex, Professor of the School of Wizardry, A-class Wizard affiliated with the Seoul Wizard Tower.]

- He's a genius. It might sound like an easy notion to weed out inconsistencies and enhance an existing spell's effects, but in reality, it's just as hard as inventing brand new spells. Well, Knights and Wizards who have circulated Mana at least once before will know what I'm talking about. Taking in that point, although we don't know who this Wizard of Bangbae-Dong is, he is definitely one of the most outstanding geniuses in the world.

- Then, in your considered opinion, just how far will this Wizard reach in the near future?
- Hmm... As you may well know, the world of Wizardry is separated into field application and theoretical studies. In the school of 'theory'... he might easily exceed A-class.
- But, exceeding A-class, isn't that the territory of the Grand Wizards?
 - Hohoho... Is that right?
 - "What do you think, Oppa?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

Yu Sae-Jung suddenly asked him.

"A, about what?" (Sae-Jin)

"No, well. About that Wizard of Bangbae-Dong. I heard that magic spells he corrected now number ten and that it's almost like new spells have been invented, since the spells' powers increased by the maximum of double the original. That's a huge deal, almost as big as business transactions of a single quarter for a Wizard Tower."

"Oh, really? But still, isn't this... a bit too much brouhaha over nothing?" (Sae-Jin)

Yu Sae-Jung's eyes sharply narrowed as if she couldn't believe what she just heard.

"What the, what do you mean by that, a brouhaha? Uh-whew. Oppa, seriously now – you gotta educate yourself a bit more."

Seeing her shake her head like that, he suddenly didn't feel all that nice. Before he hit the books, it seemed that he needed to 'punish' her first...

"...Just because you go to the Korea University, that doesn't make looking down on people a cool thing to do." (Sae-Jin)

"No, it's not like that. It's common sens... Kkyack!!"

Sae-Jin turned the TV off and pushed her down on the couch. And then, as she tried to utter the words of apology with a crimson face, he blocked her mouth with his lips.

"Wait, I've got a ton of things... to... do... No, I need to... go... Ah. Aang... Heu.. aang...!" (TL: Aang? Need to smirks bend some stuff? Oh, alright. I'll stop...)

She tried to escape from his grasp by throwing a tantrum, but everytime she did that, Sae-Jin found a way to conquer each of her erogenous zones in brilliant strategic manoeuvres.

Before long, the lights were off, and their clothes formed a small heap on the floor.

Creak, creak, creak...

And also... Accompanied by the constant creaking of the couch's frame, the pleasured, blurred moans filled up the living room.

< 36. Fading Skeins of Thread (2) > Fin.

Chapter 126: An Orc and a Lady Knight (1)

The Nosferatu woman said that since there wasn't much time left until the Fissure widened up enough to become a portal, the Bathorys had to be eliminated as soon as possible. She also added that the world needed to acknowledge the upcoming calamity and concentrate on increasing their military might as well.

But, in all honesty, Sae-Jin just couldn't really grasp the level of danger that might appear when the portal opened up for good. No matter what it was, without having a personal experience on the subject, a person wouldn't be able to understand it. Still, he planned to do his very best in the meantime.

SFX for Mana buzzing about

Currently, inside a closed-off arena, where the space was being illuminated in vivid blue and the only sound accompanying it was the buzzing of the Mana's emission, Kim Sae-Jin was in the middle of trying to find original ways to utilise the 'Mana Body'.

"...*Heavy groan*..."

And the new method he came up with, was to extract Mana out from his body and to coagulate it into a stone or a crystal. It was no different than trying to create Mana Stones artificially. Plus, Mana Stones created through this method were completely different from the Monster's Mana Stone.

First of all, the properties of these Stones could be altered to suit Sae-Jin's tastes. He could freely control the degree of hardness and strength of each stone as if it was metal ore, and create weapons and armours made purely of Mana. And not only that, a person could even swallow one of these Stones, too.

Seeing that regular Monster's Mana Stones weren't hard enough to craft into armaments, and that they also possess harmful elements thus making it impossible to eat them, these new Stones could be called revolutionary.

"God d**n. I might really die at this rate." (Sae-Jin)

However, it did prove exceptionally difficult to squeeze out Mana and force them into a blank canvas of a Mana Stone. It was to the point where, only after making three such Stones, he was this close to passing out from the dizziness.

"....Hmm."

After gulping down lots of cold water, Sae-Jin shifted his gaze towards the three Mana Stones emitting brilliant blue shine that he had made. There was not one speck of imperfection visible on or within them. He felt that there were literally endless applications for these Stones.

He could make a few more and use them in crafting various armaments, or he could sell them at astronomical sums to Knights and Wizards by advertising these Stones as 'Mana Supplements'. After all, those guys were the types to go absolutely mad when it came to all things Mana-related.

"...Hah."

Suddenly, a wry chuckle escaped his lips as he thought about this and that. Whenever he browsed internet, he read lots of people busy writing that Sae-Jin's Trait was a cheat, a biggest cheat no less. But without a doubt, he couldn't deny that they were all 100% right on the money.

Well, it was indeed beyond the realm of common sense – he was currently in the middle of making a Mana Stone artificially, an item that most normal people would shout out "Eureka!!" when picking one up off the ground.

SFX for a mobile phone vibrating

While wryly 'praising' himself inwardly, his phone vibrated. He took a glance, and saw that the call was from Yu Baek-Song.

- "Hello?"
- "...Yeah, it's me."

"How are you? Although, I'm surprised by this sudden call. I heard you're really busy nowadays."

One of the few people who proudly boasted the title of 'Kim Sae-Jin's close associates', Yu Baek-Song was being seen as the most promising person currently serving in the government. And accordingly, she was really busy with receiving lots of great 'treatment' from nearly everyone. Hell, one could probably buy twenty-odd skyscrapers with all the bribes she had refused so far.

- "Hey, you forgot about the favour you asked me before?"

"...Mm?"

Sae-Jin's head tilted in confusion. He could hear the groan of disappointment from the receiver of the phone.

- "You told me to get you a certain Mana Stone, didn't you? A mutated Ebony Wolf's. I just got it, sent in from India."

"Aha."

He then remembered. There was one Skill he hadn't been utilising until now. It was a Skill where he could 'recall' and control Monsters by using either their carcasses or their Mana Stones. However, he could only control three Monsters, so he was very carefully choosing which Monsters he'd like to control – and then, predictably, the whole thing slipped out of his mind completely.

"This is a great timing. Let's meet up right now."

- "...Now?"

"Yes. Are you busy with something?"

- "Not really. There's an appointment, but I can cancel that one. But the thing is... I just got out of the shower."

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She probably said that without thinking too much at all.

Plus, he even had a lover.

However, those were the words that held the scary power to shake a man's heart...

"...I'll be there. Right now."

Hanging up immediately, Sae-Jin departed and arrived at Yu Baek-Song's house seemingly in one single breath.

And no, it was definitely not because he wanted to see her moist hair. Not at all.

The mutated Ebony Wolf, known as 'Lakcorn'. This Monster made its base in the Himalayan mountain range and was infamous for its might and intelligence that didn't fit regular wolves. It even fought off and safely escaped the hunting parties of upper Mid Tier Knights and High Tier Hunters.

Sae-Jin had chosen this creature to be his pet dog. (?) But it had been over six months and he completely forgot about it.

"Wow. Even my Mercenary Company couldn't do it. How did you pull this one off?" (Sae-Jin)

The Mana Stone wasn't the only thing that Yu Baek-Song had procured. Below the Mana Stone, the carcass of the Monster was on the floor, its remains still a bit warm to the touch.

"We did the Athany diplomacy with India not too long ago, you see. I sneaked in a couple of conditions during the negotiation, if they were willing to hunt the Lakcorn for me." (Yu Baek-Song)

"Oh, really?"

"Yup. I'm sure a nationwide hunting operation took place over there. They probably called in 1000 Knights to hunt this Monster." (Yu Baek-Song) Seeing her brightly smiling face, adorably implying that he should praise her good work, Sae-Jin ended up inadvertently patting her head. Her white hair was still moist and soft to his touch.

"Thank you. As expected, there is no one that comes close to taking care of things better than Miss Yu Baek-Song." (Sae-Jin)

"...Keu, keheum. I'm not a Great White Tiger for nothing."

As if she got embarrassed, she slowly pushed away his hand but still couldn't hide her reddened face. Also, her nostrils continued to flare up while she smelled his scent and her ears carried on twitching as if to capture one more word of praise.

"Well, in that case, I'll see you again later!!" (Sae-Jin)

Unfortunately for her, though – Sae-Jin didn't praise her anymore.

Because he quickly exited her house while grabbing both the Lakcorn's Mana Stone and its carcass, utterly unable to control his excitement at the thoughts of riding on a Wolf's back.

SFX for the door slamming shut

And so... left alone by herself, Yu Baek-Song glared beyond the now-slammed-shut door and pouted unhappily.

"...Was it so difficult for him to praise me some more?!"

As soon as leaving Yu Baek-Song's house, Sae-Jin immediately headed off towards the Monster field. After changing to the Hero Orc Form, the mere thoughts of riding on the real Lakcorn that he only saw on TV screens caused his heart to boil in anticipation even harder.

"Hmm, hmph."

After taking a couple of deep breaths, Sae-Jin carefully picked up the Mana Stone and activated the Skill. Both the Stone and the carcass of the Monster Lakcorn suddenly scattered like fog, and then, turned into a stream of energy and entered his chest.

[The Ebony Wolf (Mutated version) has been absorbed into the Warrior's Heart.]

[The Ebony Wolf (Mutated version) has been added to the list of summonable Monsters.]

[The Ebony Wolf's Stats has been increased accordingly to match the new owner's current Stats.]

[The current grade for the Ebony Wolf's combat ability is: (High) grade.]

The alert window informed him of the smooth integration with the Mana Stone.

Sae-Jin the Orc closed his eyes and activated the Skill. And it was oh-so simple. All he had to do was whisper, "Summon" in his mind. Soon enough, murky Mana flowed out from his heart and a form made up of swirling blue and black colours, rapidly took shape.

It was like a hologram display drawing on air. When the two different coloured Mana streams combined, the giant wolf, Lakcorn regained its life once more.

Even though it was just a measly wolf, its body was big enough to stand shoulder to shoulder with Sae-Jin's Hero Orc Form. And those brilliantly sparkling eyes surveying the world displayed the valor of a warrior quite clearly.

Feeling utterly satisfied, he stroked the wolf's back.

SFX for a repeated low growl of a canine

Lakcorn recognised its new master and growled in satisfaction as well. Sae-Jin the Orc smirked and then, placed the prepared saddle on the creature's back.

"Giddy up!!"

After climbing up the saddle, Sae-Jin lightly drummed on the back of the wolf. He didn't have to point it to a direction. The wolf still understood his intentions perfectly and kicked the ground hard, rushing towards where he wanted to go.

SFX for air blowing past

This was truly a wondrous turn of speed, fast enough to effortlessly leave behind the surrounding scenery in a blur. And the sonic booms left behind their wake uprooted trees and caused maelstrom of dusty storm clouds. They were so dominating, even the Monsters in the High Tier hunting ground scurried away in fright by their approach.

However, as Sae-Jin was deeply admiring this speed that was several times faster than what he imagined...

"Everyone, take a step back!!"

...From somewhere, a resolute yet harried voice came to him. Was someone out hunting right now? When he took a glance over yonder, a head of a huge white bird rose up among the tops of tall trees, and then...

PPPHIIIEEEECKKK—!!!

Out of the blue moon, it screeched out one of the most unpleasant cries anyone had the misfortune to hear. It was so terrible that it was definitely two thousand, no, four thousand times more ear-bleeding than fingernails scraping on a blackboard.

Sae-Jin's anger shot up through the proverbial roof after hearing that terrible noise. It was the kind of sound that could pretty much enrage anyone, so both Lakcorn and the Orc couldn't control their tempers anymore.

He grabbed the reins tightly, and Lakcorn quickly changed the direction, heading towards the origin of that noise.

After handing over the Mana Stone and the carcass of a rare Monster donated by India to Yu Baek-Song, Kim Yu-Rin received an urgent message from the government that said, "a highly dangerous Monster has appeared within the High Tier hunting ground".

The Monster was called the Giant Swan. As the name indicated, it was a huge white bird and it was one of those growth-type Monsters that grew stronger with the passage of time. So, she quickly formed a subjugation team and came here.

She figured everything would be okay. Although the Giant Swan was a High Tier Monster, her team was made up of twelve High Tier Knights as well.

Unfortunately, none of them could have imagined that the condition for its growth was 'getting damaged'.

"What the f*ck is this sh*t... What should we do now, captain?!"

After it got sliced up by the Knights' swords, it began clawing madly all around it and started getting ready to evolve. And the terrifying energy the d**n thing was emitting easily exceeded that of a regular High Tier Monster.

"...Everyone, take a step back!!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin ordered the other Knights to retreat, and then changed the shape of her Gungnir from a sword to a spear. She quickly compared the amount of Mana left in her and the types of 'effects' her Trait could imbue her attack with. It seemed that knocking the Monster out was not possible. In that case, at a minimum, she'd have to take a limb from...

PPPHHIIIEEECKKK!!!!

She was grasping the spear tightly, when the Giant Swan let out an explosive and unpleasant roar. This unexpected cry easily penetrated past the Mana Barrier and attacked the ear canals, disrupting the flow of everyone's Mana. And as a result, the ears of the Knights began bleeding. However, the Giant Swan did not stop its sonic attack.

"That son of a... K, kheu..."

KKKKIIIEEECCKKKK!!

Kim Yu-Rin forced her body to stand up, even if she was stumbling about. Her aim was that huge opening of the mouth. Her eyesight was blurring away, but she just had to...

SFX for a loud roar of the Orc

It was then, another ultra-loud roar blanketed the shrill cry of the Giant Swan.

And right after that, puhurng!!!

The sound of powerful impact resounded out. Following that sound, a mace flew towards the wide-open beak of the Giant Swan. It all happened in a blink of an eye, but as Kim Yu-Rin was focusing hard at that moment, she witnessed it all in slow motion.

That slowly-flying mace and the roar definitely belonged to...

SFX for a shorter but angrier roar of an Orc

From her left, exploding out of the tall bush, a lone Orc jumped out. He was, without a doubt, the Hero Orc that proudly boasted a powerful physique, and now, it was even riding on an overwhelmingly frightening wolf Monster.

Sae-Jin was slightly taken aback by the sight of Kim Yu-Rin staring back at him. However, taking care of his anger took precedence, first of all. That ugly screech from the crazy-a*s white bird was more unpleasant than any other provocations he'd ever heard before.

PPPHHHEEECKK!!!

Even though it got hit in the face by a mace, the Giant Swan didn't give up and continued to screech out.

"SFX for the loud barkings of a wolf"

"*SFX for a loud roar of an Orc*"

Both Sae-Jin and Lakcorn responded with enraged roars.

PPPHHHEEECKKK!!!

But still, the Swan didn't want to back down, not even by an inch.

In the end, the anger reached the top of his head, and with his entire body becoming crimson, the Orc madly dashed towards the large white bird.

< 37. An Orc and a Lady Knight (1) > Fin.

Chapter 127: An Orc and a Lady Knight (2)

With its eyes completely frenzied, the big wolf carrying the Orc madly pounced on the Giant Swan. Kim Yu-Rin didn't even have enough time to get shocked. Even if it was the Hero Orc, this was going to be seriously dangerous – as soon as she thought of this, her legs moved towards the Orc all by themselves.

Kwahck!!

The mace thrown by the Orc smacked the Swan's beak and caused a big wound before returning back to his hands like a boomerang. Now that was one truly crazy sight to behold.

- Ppeuph!!

After its beak got attacked, the Giant Swan finally stopped its terrible screech, but its whole body started glowing in intense red. That was the very bad sign of it getting ready to grow, or to evolve further, as it were. However, both the Orc and Wolf didn't really care about such small details.

Ta-aht!!

The wolf Lakcorn leaped high, which put the Orc right by the Swan's nose. The mace overflowing with Mana swung right in front of the Monster. A powerful impact noise exploded out, and the shock wave shook the surroundings. Unfortunately, though – it seemed that the Giant Swan used the damage to actually push itself to evolve one step further.

SFX for steam rising

The quickly-reddening body of the Monster began decreasing in size and emitted incredibly high temperature. Opaque white steam carrying intense heat blocked the sky, melted nearby trees, and burned the ground around it.

This heat wave was so intense, even Kim Yu-Rin's Mana Barrier was quaking beyond her control, getting really close to shattering

into bits.

She quickly turned around and shouted out at her teammates.

"RUN!!"

Her shout echoed within the mountainside like a lone scream. The Knights hesitating at the rear finally stepped back a bit more. Seeing this, Kim Yu-Rin gulped down a large dollop of her own saliva. Was it possible to withstand what was about to come? Not her, but the Orc?

She couldn't remain undecided for long.

She ran towards the Orc. She did this not because of some unnecessary emotions deeply rooted in her heart, no. She convinced herself this was the case, that it was because of the curiosity and questions towards the Orc circling inside her head.

She ran towards the Orc and grabbed his hand. And at the same time...

The Orc looked at her. She too, looked at him. The wolf between them barked. And, from the body of the Swan, a massive boom exploded out.

KKKWAAHHAAANNNNGGGG!!!!

An explosion so violent, it seemingly crushed the world in its wake; a jet-black cloud shaped like a horrifying mushroom rose up from the site of explosion.

In that moment when the explosion descended on them, the Orc pulled Kim Yu-Rin in his arms and activated the Scales of Leviathan. Well, he still had to save this crazy woman regardless of her reasons for walking into the blast radius all by herself. Whoever he was acting out as in that moment – Kim Sae-Jin or the Hero Orc – both of his personalities didn't want her to die, after all.

The explosion of the ground became smoke and rose up to the air. Following the apocalyptic chaos that shook the entire

mountainside, a heavy, choking silence descended. However, the land upon where the two of them stood no longer existed. The site of the mind-numbing explosion was caved in like the mouth of a volcano, the end of the pit not visible to the naked eye.

Swish~ swish~

Hazy dust particles settled down on the ground like nuclear fallout. There were a handful of the giant white bird's feathers mixed in among this fog.

Sae-Jin the Orc slowly opened his eyes within the still darkness. Only now he felt that his head, lost among the burning rage and gnawing instincts, had cooled down for him to think properly.

Gradually, his blurry vision sharpened up.

He saw a beautiful woman, right in front of his nose – her comfortably-closed eyes, perfectly shaped nose, lips slightly wet from blood. And he brushed those lips with his thick finger unconsciously.

"Euh, mmm..."

Kim Yu-Rin showed some reaction, which caused the Orc to stiffen up a little. For now, he thought it would be a good idea to extricate himself from this awkward position, where it kind of looked like they were hugging each other. But she was using his arm like a pillow.

He wondered whether to simply yank his arm lose, but in the end, he just let out a long sigh, instead.

"Fuu-woo..."

However, if there was one thing Sae-Jin didn't count on, it was that the sigh of an Orc was incomparably powerful to that of a human's.

The storm winds escaping from the Orc's lips arrived at her eyes,

blowing her hair back and shook her eyelashes in the process. And so, she woke up from her slumber, just like that.

```
" "
```

Two of them blinked and continued to stare at each other. From Kim Yu-Rin's point of view, this was way too fast a change of pace for her.

Well, the thing was, from the moment when the Orc suddenly appeared, and when she got mixed in the explosion while chasing after the Orc, and then... After he grabbed her into his arms, and finally, to this very moment where his face was completely filling up her view, all of these happened in just over a minute for her as far as time frame was concerned.

"...You, should stand now." (Sae-Jin)

After staring at each other like this for who knows how long, the baritone voice of the Orc tickled her ears.

"Ah, yes. Right..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin quickly got up. The Orc also stood up.

"W, where do you think we are now?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

With a slightly reddened face, Kim Yu-Rin asked him while stealing a quick glance at the Orc.

"Don't know. Possible, we fell deep underground, because of explosion." (Sae-Jin)

"...You could be right." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin couldn't help but feel a distinct sense of deja vu right now. There was a situation like this one in the past, although there were quite a few more people back then.

"This place, not a cave like last time." (Sae-Jin)

The Orc said, as he lifted his head to look at the ceiling. No visible

light rays permeated from up there, but it sure was very high...

"Ah, in that case..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin pulled her mobile phone out from the pocket. But there was no way an electronic device would survive such a shocking explosion.

"It's not working...."

The Orc shook his head while thinking, Obviously it wouldn't... and then he surveyed his surroundings a little more closely.

He didn't sense any particular 'funny' flow of Mana, and he could hear the sound of underground stream flowing by not too far from his position. So, this place could be...

'...Could this be, nothing more than a simple accident?'

This was different from back then, when he got caught in the isolation barrier trap. He simply fell underground after getting sucked into that large explosion.

"Euh, euh!! Euh, euhk!!"

"...?"

But quite literally out of the blue, Kim Yu-Rin began struggling for some reason, like a person trying her very best to finish her... business in a toilet.

The lashes on her tightly-closed eyes trembled while both of her fists were clenched real tightly. It was kind of a funny scene to look at, but at the same time, he had seen something similar to that before...

"...I, I can't wield Mana." (Kim Yu-Rin)

After ten minutes of struggle later.

With a face of someone who just lost her country, Kim Yu-Rin looked at the Orc while being on the verge of tears.

Inside this dark space, deep beneath the surface of the planet, a bonfire was burning and spreading warmth, with two 'people' basking in it while idly spending time there.

They were thinking that, since this was an accident, there should be a rescue team coming for them soon enough and that they should stay there for now.

"I think it's the Giant Swan's ability." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin suddenly opened her mouth while she stared into the fire.

"There's a wound on my back that could've been caused by the explosion. That Monster's Mana must have invaded my body." (Kim Yu-Rin)

""

The Orc didn't say anything. She took a glance at the Orc and continued.

"I think I'll be fine in a week's time." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Fuu."

Then, the Orc let out a lengthy sigh and stood up.

Is he going to hit me?!

Kim Yu-Rin stiffened up noticeably. As if to confirm her worst fears, the Orc did reach out towards her, and then...

Kwajeek!!

He broke off a big chunk of rock protruding from the ground.

"...Wh, what are you planning to do with that?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin somehow regained her calm from her shuddering and asked him. The Orc didn't say anything and simply used the Orc's Smithing Technique. Then, the uneven surface smoothed out, and its shape lengthened into a pole-like form.

"...Wah?!"

"Orcs, make weapons like this." (Sae-Jin)

Feeling slightly awkward by Kim Yu-Rin's way-too shocked reaction, Sae-Jin the Orc said something and then broke off another piece of rock.

Afterwards, the Orc continued to break off rocks from the ground and then, grinded them, combined them, and reshaped them for the next 30 minutes or so.

Initially, Kim Yu-Rin watched on with an interest at what he was trying to achieve, then couldn't help but be deeply impressed by the end results.

SFX for sounds of hammering.

At the place where the Orc's hands went past, a small but remarkable stone hut stood proudly.

Although there was a big penalty in the Orc Form, the usefulness of the A-level Goblin's Craftsmanship displayed here was still quite amazing, indeed.

"Wowsers, just how did you..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"You, sleep inside." (Sae-Jin)

She was so shocked, she couldn't even properly finish her sentence, but the Orc spoke as if it was nothing much.

"I, sleep here." (Sae-Jin)

This time, he poured Mana to the ground. The solid stone floor rose up in a squarish shape and then changed into a stone bed.

"Uhm, that... Thank you." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin muttered as she stroked the pillar of the rather adorable little stone hut.

However, she unhurriedly pitter-pattered right next to him and smiled instead.

"But we~ll, I'm not feeling sleepy, though~?"

The ends of her eyes curved upwards coquettishly. The tips of her hair slightly brushed against his arm.

What the hell is up with this aegyo, all of a sudden?!

Sae-Jin did his very best to calm down his trembling heart.

About half a day's stay in the underground prison later.

Kim Yu-Rin had been fiddling with the unresponsive mobile phone and a communication crystal for a while, before a loud grumble came out from her stomach.

"Aht...!"

It was an embarrassing slip-up. She stopped doing everything and stole another quick glance at the Orc. She felt like hiding in a hole.

The sound should have been loud enough to surprise him, yet the Orc didn't even seem perturbed as he just yanked a big chunk of meat out of his Expanding Pocket.

Kim Yu-Rin's rounded eyes began sparkling dangerously.

The Orc increased the strength of the bonfire and began an impromptu BBQ right there. After 'nicely' sharing the tasty meat, the look of pure satisfaction was writ large on her face as she rubbed down her filled-up belly.

However, not too long after that, she began smacking her lips noisily. The Orc dumbfoundedly looked at her, as if to ask if there was a group of homeless beggars living inside her stomach or something. She quickly waved her hands in denial, and said that this time, it was actually her thirst acting up.

Without a word, the Orc went in search of the underground stream.

He only needed ten minutes as it was nearby. When he poked a hole on the wall where it seemed just about right, a small but steady stream of underground water began leaking out. He quickly fashioned a container out of stone and filled it with water, taking it back to Kim Yu-Rin.

She was definitely embarrassed by her powerless self that was only good for annoying the Orc, but still, drank the water with an ecstatic expression.

"Kkyah...aht."

It was so, so refreshing.

The Orc chuckled after seeing her reaction, and Kim Yu-Rin also smiled faintly after seeing his expression.

Now that he was done with all the side work related to her, Sae-Jin the Orc sat down on the ground and started the maintenance on his mace. While listening to the rhythmic sound of metal being sheared off and smoothed out, Kim Yu-Rin slowly closed her eyes.

Unfortunately... a new problem arose after about one hour had passed by. It was to be expected, really. After all, she had eaten and drank, so the next natural action of the human digestive system would be...

"...Euh, euhk..."

She searched for a 'good' spot while desperately holding it in. It seemed that, this nature's call was for both numbers... But no, she told herself that she could handle something like this.

The patience and endurance of a Knight was nothing to scoff about, after all.

But her face continued to get redder and redder. Her thighs began rubbing against each other all by themselves, and her body was shivering uncontrollably.

Only then, she realised something quite important.

A Knight without the support of Mana was not a Knight – and that those who 'had it but lost it' were weaker than those who

'originally never had it'....

"Uhm, excuse me... I, ah, need to go somewhere, real quick..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Finally unable to hold it in anymore, she began to shuffle towards some unknown destination in uneasy steps. Too bad, this was a wide-open area with no place to hide...

"Inside the hut. I made a small place." (Sae-Jin)

""

Kim Yu-Rin's body froze still after hearing the Orc's words that sounded like a divine oracle from the heavenly saviour.

"No, no, it's, it's not like that.... I just want to wash my hands, you see. I am, a little bit... a clean freak... you see..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

While uttering something, she ever-so slowly and painfully inched closer to the hut.

"Fuht."

She then heard the Orc's low chuckle. Kim Yu-Rin bit down on her lips while tears formed on the corners of her eyes.

However...

While the two of them were enjoying a bit of an event that could have happened in everyday lives...

An 'egg' lying not too far from where they were began trembling slightly.

And this thing was... an egg the Giant Swan spat out before it went kaboom.

[A powerful explosion occurred during the Giant Swan raid, causing Knight Kim Yu-Rin to go missing in action. The Raven Knights Order has dispatched an emergency rescue team to the site, but it is now understood that, due to the Giant Swan's unique

parasitic and harmful Mana acting like a nuclear fallout, it has proven to be exceptionally difficult to descend to where she might be...]

A breaking news broadcast could be seen on the TV screen located within the office of the Mercenary Company's director of operations.

"Yes, Miss Sae-Jung. Ah, the Guild Master is currently..." (Kim Sun-Ho)

[At the same time, the Knights witnessed the Hero Orc appearing in the middle of the raid...]

Acting as a temporary director, the sweating Kim Sun-Ho found himself busy conversing with the "Boss Madam" while keeping an eye on the news broadcast at the same time.

"I believe that, he might not be able to return home for a few days due to a difficult assignment. But you don't have to worry. Since Miss Sae-Jung was in the middle of training, he told me personally that he will contact you as soon as he finds the right time..." (Kim Sun-Ho)

- "....Is that true?"
- "Of course. Why would I ever lie to you?"
- "Well, then. Do you know where Hazeline Unni is right now?"
- "She's probably at the Yoseon Alchemy House at this very moment. You could call her and find out."
 - "...Hmph. I understand."

Yu Sae-Jung ended the call. Kim Sun-Ho put his phone down and groaned out.

"...Just why did you go and interfere in that raid, boss?" (Kim Sun-Ho)

He bitterly murmured to himself.

At that moment, the news broadcast was showing the footage of the Hero Orc riding on top of a giant wolf rushing towards the white bird, while Kim Yu-Rin was hurriedly chasing after him.

< 37. An Orc and a Lady Knight (2) > Fin.

Chapter 128: An Orc and a Lady Knight (3)

After spending a rough estimate of 18 hours within this dark and gloomy place.

Kim Yu-Rin was inside the stone hut, while Sae-Jin the Orc was lying on the stone bed, both of them trying hard to fall asleep – however, their heads were full of own complicated thoughts and so, it proved to be a difficult task to get the much-needed shut-eye.

In Kim Yu-Rin's case, the moment she laid down to sleep, curiosity and questions regarding the Orc, as well as worries over her subordinates who might have somehow gotten mixed up in that explosion continuously popped up in her head.

'Surely, they should be okay since they are all quick on their feet. They better be okay...' (Kim Yu-Rin)

Unlike her, though, the Orc's thoughts were a bit more related to the current issue and perhaps, just as urgent as well.

'It might get really dicey if I stay near her for too long. Gotta get out of this place soon, or I need to stay away from her...' (Sae-Jin)

First of all, the basic instincts of the Orc was the problem. Of course, he was carrying around a special potion in the 'Spiritualised' form inside him that could suppress all of the Orc's baser instincts.

As this Orc Form was getting more powerful with each passing day, there had been a few times already when he almost lost all his reasoning and went berserk after some stupid Monsters tried to get on his nerves.

Of course, there were no stupid Monsters in this dark, gloomy cavern to test his patience, but still, there was an even more threatening existence right next to him.

The Orc turned his head and took a slight glance at the hut. He made sure it was as sturdy as it could get, and also added in a

function that, once the door was closed from inside, it'd be locked automatically. However, as it was made out of nothing but stone, it was true that he could destroy it in seconds if he went berserk once more.

'Enough for four days... This should be fine, if it's this much.' (Sae-Jin)

After checking the amount of potion left, he let out a long sigh.

The two people wrestling with their own thoughts began slowly drifting into the calm embrace of sleep as the hours ticked by.

And so... the next day had come, and inside this dark space where it was difficult to tell whether it was morning or not.

Kim Yu-Rin woke up from her slumber thanks to several loud Pphung! Pphung! coming from outside the hut – and to some extent, from the sound of her own stomach grumbling as well. Slowly opening her eyes, she got up from the soft stone bed – rather contradictory, but true in this case – and looked outside from the hut's window.

Kwahang!! Kwahaaang!!

The Orc was busy pounding on the poor, innocent ground.

"...What on earth is he doing?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin exited the hut, her head full of questions.

SFX for the door creaking open

The Orc turned his head towards her direction after hearing the door opening.

"What are you doing?"

She asked him while rubbing her eyes.

"I make vibration. To tell the people coming for us, where we are." (Sae-Jin)

"...Ah."

Finally understanding what was happening, she then sat down on a stone chair that seemed to have materialised out of nowhere just now.

Kim Yu-Rin decided to stay and watch the Orc's construction efforts in order to wake her sleepy head up completely. Watching those rippling muscles and hearing the crystal clear sound of the mace, sweat drops dancing in the air, and his hair, wet from the proof of his labour...

As she was happily taking this sight in, all of a sudden, she heard the sounds of something powerfully running towards her direction from some distance away. Surprised out of her mind, Kim Yu-Rin quickly jumped right to the Orc's side.

"It's a Monster!! Get ready for battle!!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin shouted out so, and reached down to her waist to grab her weapon, Gungnir. A force of habit built over the years on the job, it was.

Not too long after, a Monster did appear for real. She bravely pulled out her sword and pointed the stunningly sharp edge towards a huge wolf.

- "...Please, pick up your weapon!!" (Kim Yu-Rin)
- "...No need."

The completely tense Kim Yu-Rin took on the battle stance. But the Orc simply chuckled and approached the wolf in unhurried steps.

"What?! Be careful!! I can sense its dangerous aur..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Even before her scared words could continue, the Orc began stroking the head of the wolf in a display of utter composure. And the wolf received the patting in a posture full of adorable charm, as if it had reverted back to being a puppy or something. Its eyes arched like a pair of new moons, its ears folded back and its tail

swayed from side to side in quiet contentment.

Without a doubt, this was a bona fide Monster, judging from its large, threatening size which was easily twice that of a regular full-grown man...

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"It's my pet." (Sae-Jin)
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She nearly dropped her sword then.

"...Pardon?"

"Name is Cornlak. You saw me riding it." (Sae-Jin)

".....Ah. Aha."

Although it was hard to believe those words, she had to believe them regardless, after witnessing the situation for herself. Kim Yu-Rin sheathed her sword back into its scabbard and sat down on the stone chair. Then, she carefully observed the wolf which was busy making a strange whimpering noise while showing off lots of aegyo.

As an aside, she liked small, adorable and fluffy dolls. Well, they were cute, so there.

Of course, this wolf wasn't small at all. However, seeing it full of aegyo as if it was a fox cub and not some menacing wolf, it was way too...

"E, excuse me, Mister Orc?"

Unable to endure it anymore, Kim Yu-Rin stutteringly opened her mouth. Her cheeks were somewhat dyed in red without her knowledge.

"Mm?"

"Can, can I also, uh, touch your Cornsalad, too?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Cornlak."

"Oh, Cornlak. Sorry." (Kim Yu-Rin)

The Orc nodded his head and lightly drummed Cornlak's back.

Kim Yu-Rin stealthily got up from the chair and approached the huge wolf. Although it growled a bit towards her, when Sae-Jin the Orc signaled it to behave itself, the wolf quietly laid down on the ground.

She carefully reached out and ran her palm against Cornlak's back. Then, her eyes popped open extra round. If she was to describe the sensation in two words, it was 'soft' and 'fluffy'. The fur of regular wolves were stiff and hard, yet this guy was in another dimension altogether.

It was as if she was touching the skin of a newborn, so soft and malleable. Her moods improved simply by touching it – this, this was a brand new world she had never ever experienced before...

"Wow." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Her eyes sparkled dangerously as she continued stroking Cornlak's back. At first, it was her hand only, but now, not only her cheeks, but she was using her entire body to rub against the wolf. That was how out-of-this-world addictive this feeling was.

Whimper, whimper...

Suddenly getting violated by Kim Yu-Rin, Cornlak sent gazes full of helplessness, but its owner simply sent back a gaze of his own that commanded it to endure for now. (TL: Well, the author used a pun-based joke here, but regrettably, it's un-translatable, as usual. See, the thing is, "Yu-Rin" in Hanja form can also mean "violation", or "invading another's space". So the author wrote that the wolf was getting Yu-Rin'ed by Kim Yu-Rin.)

Within this dark and gloomy space where there was literally nothing but two people and a giant wolf, all they could was to talk to while away the time.

While being inside the warm 'embrace' of Cornlak, Kim Yu-Rin asked the Orc a fair few number of questions while carefully

studying his reactions.

She asked, how had he been living so far, why did he chase her out back then; where did he learn to speak Korean, where did he find such a huge wolf as a pet, and just where he was until now, before making this sudden reappearance?

All the answers the Orc provided was short – he chased her out because he didn't like her, and the rest, they were not something she should know.

""

And so, thanks to his short and curt replies, she was quite angry right now. With deeply pouting lips, she was glaring at the bonfire, while she roughly rubbed the poor and blameless Cornlak's back. Sae-Jin thought dandruff might fall like snow at that rate.

"By the way..."

Kim Yu-Rin opened her mouth again, just as Cornlak was getting fatigued.

"...Do you know a human named Kim Sae-Jin?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

She asked while glaring at the Orc with a pair of blunt eyes. Stiffening up slightly, Sae-Jin fell into a slight dilemma here. This woman was definitely suspecting something. Although he had no idea what she was thinking of, without a doubt, he had to be very mindful of where he stepped here...

"I know him." (Sae-Jin)

"And how do you know him?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"None of your business."

Immediately, she snatched a handful of Cornlak's fur. When the wolf got surprised and raised its head, she apologised profusely to it and gently patted its body.

"Sure, it may not be any of my business, but... I ask, since I've never seen that person enter your village not even once until

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now." (Kim Yu-Rin)
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The Orc didn't say anything. He was currently too busy thinking of how to respond at the moment, actually.

However, Kim Yu-Rin misinterpreted his silence as yet another "None of your business", and her brows furrowed in dissatisfaction. And so, she ended up spitting out loud the suspicions that had been brewing inside her head until now.

"Are you making weapons for that person?" (Kim Yu-Rin)
"...?!"

At this completely unexpected dog's barkings, the Orc turned to look at Kim Yu-Rin. She then displayed quite a skillful body movement technique to steal away the mace resting next to the Orc.

"What the...?" (Sae-Jin)

"Take a good look. See this? This mark over here, and..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin pointed at a certain faint mark on the metal handle of the mace, and then reached down to her Gungnir...

"My swor... Huh? What the? Where did it go?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

...She was going to unsheathe Gungnir, but it wasn't there anymore. She hurriedly patted and searched all over her body in sheer panic.

"But, but, but, why... I couldn't have lost it, have I?! No, it was with me until just now..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

As Kim Yu-Rin's face slowly turned purple while she sputtered words out in confusion, the Orc silently pointed towards Cornlak's direction. She then quickly shifted her gaze towards the wolf. And sure enough, there was a hilt of a sword sticking out from the corner of its maws. She immediately spat out a lengthy sigh of

relief.

"Uh-whew..."

Since its owner's weapon was stolen, the ever-so-loyal Cornlak had stolen the weapon of the thief, instead...

"Eii, you really surprised me there, you know, little baby. Please give it back." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Finally, some of the lost colour returned to her face. Kim Yu-Rin grasped the hilt and tried to extricate the sword, but Cornlak didn't want to let it go.

Cornlak could be called the 'avatar' of the Lakcorn of India, and its jaw strength was as much as ten tons, maybe even more. Didn't matter how hard she may have trained herself as a Knight, without the aid of Mana, she was not going to win against such jaw strength.

"H, hey, come on now, stop fooling around and... Euh!! Euh!! No, wait. Hey!! What's the matter with you?!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin wrestled with the hilt for a considerable length of time, before suddenly realising the situation – then, she tossed the mace back towards the Orc's thigh.

SFX for an item being smoothly sliding out

Only then, Cornlak immediately let go of the sword.

"...And now, take a look over here." (Kim Yu-Rin)

After getting her treasured sword back, Kim Yu-Rin flicked Cornlak's forehead, and then showed the small mark inscribed at the bottom of the hilt.

Even the Orc was stunned by this revelation. Well, most people would never be aware of small, unconscious habits of theirs.

"You can also clearly see that, right?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

" "

The Orc looked straight into her eyes. Thankfully, it didn't seem like she had thought of the possibility that 'the Orc could be Kim Sae-Jin' yet. That was par for the course, really. Just who on earth could dream up a scenario where an Orc and a human were the exact same person?

"Yeah, so?" (Sae-Jin)

And so... the Orc decided to maintain his very thick skin for now. He was planning to not say anything unnecessary, and let her continue on with misunderstandings and suspicions for the rest of her life. (TL: Really now?!)

"...Pardon?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"So? So what?"

"No, hang on... Did you make this..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Maybe, Kim Sae-Jin make this. Maybe, I borrow from him and use mace." (Sae-Jin)

The Orc deliberately hardened his facial expression and frowned deeply.

"But, still..."

"No matter. Kim Sae-Jin, I trust much more than you. And, none of your business. Stop crossing the line." (Sae-Jin)

...Of course, he'd trust himself more than anyone else, really.

As if she still had something else to say, Kim Yu-Rin's lips moved up and down, but in the end, she returned to her seat while sighing out grandly. Then, she hugged Cornlak with a depressed face and whispered meekly to the wolf.

"Hey, would you like to come to my place instead of that Orc's?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Hmph."

The Orc smirked and secured the mace on his hips. Afterwards,

the two of them didn't say anything else for a while.

10 minutes, 20, then a hour later... The time continued to flow without restraint and resulted in the poor ol' Cornlak getting much-unwanted forceful coat-shedding.

SFX for winds suddenly picking up

Winds began blowing suddenly in this dark arena. Could it be the rescue party? Both of them turned to look at the direction where the wind came from.

However, instead of rescue personnel, they spotted a bird-like creature over there.

SFX for a chick's cries

Tweeting like a little chick, it was a white bird that kind of resembled a long-tailed tit or maybe even the Korean crow-tit, complete with a pair of round and shining eyes, as well as a small and narrow beak. It's body was on the big side for a real bird, but it was about as big as a regular puppy dog and thus, rather intensely adorable.

"...What is that thing?" (Sae-Jin)

As the Orc was trying to figure out the source of this strange aura hidden below that cute countenance, suddenly, Kim Yu-Rin stood up as if she was in a trance.

SFX for a chick's cries

She then began walking dazedly towards the tweeting (?) bird.

It was at this very moment when the Orc's alarm bells rang around like crazy.

The flow of that dangerous Mana pooling around its beak, that was a type of a Breath attack...

FFFHHHHEEEECCCKKK!!!

The tweeting b*****d (?) suddenly spat out a stream of white

flames. It was the lethal White Flames, the most powerful of all hellish flames out there.

PAAAAHAAANG!!

White flames of the Breath displayed mighty destructive power as the attack spread out in a half-moon shape. It was the moment when the dark, gloomy cavern was lit up with a blinding white light.

< 37. An Orc and a Lady Knight (3) > Fin.

Chapter 129: An Orc and a Lady Knight (4)

The Breath fired out well before the Orc could even react. However, it still collapsed into nothingness when a flash of golden sword light swept by. As expected, even without the support of Mana, the power of Kim Yu-Rin's Gungnir was something else entirely.

"What the heck is going on...?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin panicked somewhat as she stared at this strange bird.

Pphiiiack!! Pphiiaack!!

As if it got pissed off by the failure of its attack, the bird angrily tweeted out while flapping its wings all over the place.

The Orc firmly grasped his mace and pulled Kim Yu-Rin back behind him.

"Dangerous." (Sae-Jin)

The bird chirped like a little chick again, its bright and intelligent eyes staring at both of them.

The Orc took a glance at Kim Yu-Rin. For some weird reason, she was busy licking her lips...

"Doesn't matter. Still dangerous." (Sae-Jin)

"....I'm aware of that already. I also witnessed it spew out a Breath just now, you know." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"If you know, then concentrate properly."

Sae-Jin the Orc activated the Eyes of the Wolf. Unfortunately, even with the eyes that could easily suss out everything about the opponent, he couldn't spot that bird's weakness at all. In other words, that monstrosity of a bird didn't have a weak point.

Of course, that didn't mean it was the most powerful being in the world. And it sure looked plenty weak, enough to make him think

that it would be squashed into a fine meat paste no matter where he lands a hit...

"But, but, isn't it still a youngling? I mean, isn't there... a way to tame that creature?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Although she was currently in the state of being charmed, what she said did have some merit to it. If it was possible, then that bird would become an enormously powerful ally.

The Orc fell into a slight dilemma.

In that short gap, the Monster spat out yet another Breath with a loud Ppheeeck!! This time, the Orc stepped up and blocked it. The attribute imbued to the mace called [Destruction, A level] could even render magic attacks completely useless; when the Breath met the mace, it dispersed like blowing dust. At the same time, the thoughts of taming the darn thing dispersed as well.

"You, want to tame that? That thing, very bad. Ugly attitude." (Sae-Jin)

""

Kim Yu-Rin wordlessly scratched the back of her neck.

"Must kill it. Now." (Sae-Jin)

Maybe because it was nothing more than a new born, although it did possess abnormal strength, it was still way too early to fight against the Orc and Kim Yu-Rin. However, considering its young age, no doubt the d**n Monster would evolve into something far more dangerous in the future.

"Oh well, if it's for the best, then I guess there's no choice." (Kim Yu-Rin)

After agreeing with the Orc's assessment, Kim Yu-Rin grasped her sword tightly while her expression darkened. As if it had sensed the oozing killing intent, the bird opened its beak wide. The Orc and Kim Yu-Rin tensed up, wondering just what type of Breath this thing might spew out next.

SFX for an empty stomach rumbling

A sound that easily shattered the seriousness of the situation resounded out. The Orc shot Kim Yu-Rin a glare automatically. She quickly shook her head vehemently, her face reddening.

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"...Honestly?" (Sae-Jin)
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"Y, yes, it wasn't me!! Really!!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

The Orc didn't retract his accusing stares, but shifted it towards Cornlak who was busy growling at the bird. However, there was no way a specially-summoned creature like his wolf would feel hunger. That left only one other possibility...

"...That chick, don't you think maybe it's just hungry?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

""

"We might be able to lure it with food, you know." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin's voice was full of mirth.

However, the Orc quickly saw through the ominous gathering of Mana within the bird's innards.

"No. Step back!!" (Sae-Jin)

The Orc left Kim Yu-Rin in the care of Cornlak and dashed towards the bird. Too bad, the creature flapped its wings and hurriedly ran off into the air.

And so, the bird circled around the two's head for a bit, before opening wide its beak once more.

The Orc quickly threw the mace at the bird. But before it could hit, an inconceivably powerful storm winds rushed out from that tiny beak of the Monster.

No, more correctly, rather than 'rushing out', it was more like the Monster was sucking everything in with that small mouth. If one was to compare this to the previous Breath attacks, it wasn't all that threatening. But still, there was one big problem – it wasn't just a threat only to the Orc.

Plop...

Suddenly, Kim Yu-Rin collapsed. The Orc hurriedly looked back. Riding on the swirling air, her Mana was being drained out and sucked into the Monster's mouth.

Initially, the colour of escaping Mana was the usual blue, but soon, its hue darkened gradually, until... it became the hue of blood as it left her.

She was going to die at this rate. The Orc threw the mace again, but the d**n Monster easily evaded the thrown weapon by floating this way and that.

In the end, he chose to use 'Mana Crafting'. He remotely manipulated Mana found in the air and formed a spear out of it, then fired it at the belly of the Monster.

Kwajeeck!!

It seemed that the Monster couldn't dodge the spear that shot out from literally the thin air. One of its wings were badly maimed, which finally prompted the creature to stop sucking out Kim Yu-Rin's Mana, and then, in panic, it flew higher and higher until it disappeared into the darkened ceiling.

Of course, he couldn't chase after it, even if he wanted to. The Orc's instincts were busy telling him to climb up the cavern walls just to smash that deceptively-cute face in to a mush, but there was someone else who needed his attention far more urgently.

With shaking hands, Sae-Jin quickly drank the potion designed to suppress the Orc's instincts.

Finally regaining his senses, Sae-Jin walked back towards Kim Yu-Rin. If there were blood mixed in with Mana, that meant the forceful absorption had nearly pushed her over the death's doorway. He could easily see that her face was wanner compared to before.

"Oii!!"

The Orc shouted out as he shook her.

At his thunderous shout, she broke free from the grips of unconsciousness and slowly opened her eyes.

"You, still alive?" (Sae-Jin)

Within her blurry sight, Kim Yu-Rin could see the panicking face of the Orc.

Didn't he say that he chased her away, because he didn't like her anymore – so why was he showing such panicked face, she wondered. But then, she no longer had the leisure to worry about such a thing.

As she silently closed her eyes once more, something slipped inside her mouth.

It was a weird feeling thing, this – rock hard, yet soft and malleable. There was no taste to it, and equally, no scent either. But her body reacted first and she began swallowing down this strange foreign substance. At the same time, a mysterious effect took hold of her body, but this was as far as her memories could record, as her consciousness fell deep into darkness.

*

The emergency treatment proved to be successful. If he didn't make a artificial Mana Stone on the spot and feed it to her, she would have drawn her last breath right here.

Although she had received a life-threatening injury, as her body was in the most tip-top shape imaginable, it didn't take too long for her to open her eyes again.

She looked gaunt and haggard as too much of her Mana got sucked out, but he actually preferred this appearance. The thing was, the Orcs' original nature made them hate the sickly and the dying. The medicine had run out already now, so this was better, compared to being healthy and full of life. (TL: I've no idea what the author is trying to write here. I've TLed it literally, but he just makes no darn sense at all...)

"You, can't use Mana yet?" (Sae-Jin)

"...Yes, unfortunately..."

The nameless bird that stole away even the last drop of Kim Yu-Rin's Mana was long gone by now. And there was not one sign of the rescue party coming for them. The only fortunate thing was that, there was more than enough food collected inside his Expanding Pocket. That was it.

"...You, feel bad somewhere?" (Sae-Jin)

"I'm more or less okay... for now. But I should have realised that there is parasitic Mana flowing inside me. I'm a Knight, so I should have been prepared even for the unexpected..."

The parasitic Mana. Normally, there were a few special Monsters that possessed completely different anatomy and type of Mana compared to that of humans. And the 'parasitic Mana' was one of the most bizarre and difficult to deal with, among the unique types of Monster Mana out there.

This flow of Mana came with some form of sentience, and it would voluntarily enter another lifeform's body. Then, it would start blocking the natural flow of the host's Mana, forcibly 'stockpiling' it.

And when the owner of that parasitic Mana showed up again, the stockpiled Mana, along with the parasitic one, would be absorbed into the Monster.

So, when viewed from that point, the white bird was an exceptional specimen, indeed. The host was not just anyone but the Kim Yu-Rin, and it didn't even take 20 seconds before she was

driven nearly to death by its ferocious appetite.

"...I've survived thanks to you. Mister Orc, thank you very much." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Call, if you need something." (Sae-Jin)

Chuckling slightly, Sae-Jin the Orc tried to exit the stone hut, but...

"...Excuse me." (Kim Yu-Rin)

She stopped the Orc from leaving, and with her head peeking out from below the improvised bed sheet, cutely added a couple more things.

"I, uh... am feeling hungry..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"...Wait here."

The Orc didn't take long to cook up some gruel and brought it to her.

"...I can't move my hands well." (Kim Yu-Rin)

He ended up feeding her.

"Thank you." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Finally, Kim Yu-Rin was satisfied and gradually fell asleep.

Pretty soon, the Orc became a butler – or maybe, a servant.

When she got hungry, he cooked more gruel for her; when she tried to get in some exercise with that still-recovering body of hers, he pushed her back into bed; when she was bored, he sat there and listened to her, and even helped her fall asleep when she couldn't do it alone...

However, there was one upshot to all this: she didn't come outside the hut anymore, so when she was resting inside, Sae-Jin could revert back to human form to catch his breath.

Meanwhile, all these foreign happenings became a refreshing experience and a wonderful memory for Kim Yu-Rin. She enjoyed the gentle happiness rising from this feeling of being someone precious. Well, although she had looked after many of her subordinates, not once had she received such one-sided care before until now.

Yes, she was stuck in this darkness, and yes, there was that parasitic Mana still squirming inside her, yet she felt good everyday. Of course, she was still human, so before she went to bed, brand new fears and even bouts of depression rose up one after the other. But thanks to the Orc coming to visit her bedside, she could endure it.

As a result, her smiles occurred far more frequently than ever before.

And so, while relying on each other, or more correctly, the Orc becoming the unconditional anchor for her to rely on, a week went by.

While her Mana wouldn't circulate until she received proper medical care outside, still, she had regained most of her vigour back.

"Rescue party, here very soon." (Sae-Jin)

The Orc spoke as he patted Cornlak. He found this out after using the Eyes of the Wolf to thoroughly observe the sky-high ceiling. Countless Knights and rescue personnel had seemingly completed all the necessary preparations to begin the rescue operation.

"...Is that so?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

However, Kim Yu-Rin showed a strange reaction that was neither happiness nor sadness. While pouting, she began clicking her tongue. Cornlak stealthily left the Orc's side and trotted over to her.

When the Orc glared at the huge wolf with dumbfounded eyes,

Yu-Rin stuck her tongue slightly out. Merong.

"...When we get up there, we won't run into each other again, right?"

Kim Yu-Rin wordlessly brushed Cornlak's fur for a little while, before asking him as if she was talking about the passing weather.

The Orc replied coldly.

"Yep."

""

She buried her head in Cornlak's luxurious fur with a depressed expression.

Her mind was getting messy once more.

A Monster not running into humans – well, that was par for the course, really. No, it was simply stating the obvious. But why did the corner of her heart feel like...

Kim Yu-Rin silently swam within her thoughts. Several useless and messy thoughts about the Orc and herself filled her head up.

The two of them spent what could be their last day of staying down here in unbreakable silence.

*

Next day. Kim Yu-Rin slowly opened her eyes, prompted by faint noise of chatter and equally faint light beams coming from above. She then heard conversations.

Realising that the rescue party had finally come, she lifted her fatigued body up from the stone bed. Her throat was parched and every muscle in her body was aching. She was about to be rescued, yet she didn't really feel all that good. No, she felt somewhat lonely and disappointed, instead.

"I see a stone house down there!! And then, an.. Orc!! Hey, someone up there, quickly pass me my sword!!"

Seeing that something bad might happen at this rate, she pushed her body and exited the stone hut. As soon as she stepped out, she saw the Orc sitting on the stone bed, his face impassive as usual as he opened his mouth.

"You woke up?" (Sae-Jin)

""

This time, Kim Yu-Rin didn't say anything.

Her emotion was in a mess.

To be perfectly honest, she didn't want to part ways with him.

This emotion where she wanted to stay next to someone through thick and thin, this emotion where she would feel happy and conflicted all at the same time, she didn't expect to feel it towards the Orc... but it happened.

The time they spent together within this darkness was just long enough, and the Orc's wholehearted caring was also enough to powerfully move the weakened Kim Yu-Rin's heart.

"Me, say nothing from now on. You, speak for me when we go up." (Sae-Jin)

"...I'll leave you behind alone." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"...What?"

"You're a monster, that's why." (Kim Yu-Rin)

The Orc glared at Kim Yu-Rin dumbfoundedly. She didn't avoid his eyes and squarely met them with her own. Then, she began to feel disappointed again. Why was he being so indifferent like this? Couldn't he be just a bit nicer towards her? A certain emotion inside her suddenly welled up uncontrollably.

"To me, it won't matter whether you're outside or inside this hole, if you are not planning to meet me anyways..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Even while on the verge of tears, she didn't shed a single

teardrop.

"...Can't be helped. Then, you, go up alone." (Sae-Jin)

"Ah, seriously...?!"

Even her final triumph card didn't work against the determined Orc.

Meanwhile, several Knights wielding swords shouted at them while being lowered by the magically-operated lift system.

"Knight Kim Yu-Rin!! Is that you, ma'am?"

"...Yes. Over here." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Although she hesitated, she still answered them in the end.

"Please, stand aside!! We will take care of the Orc and the wolf!!"

At this declaration, she shifted her gaze to the Orc, to Cornlak, and back to the descending Knights above. She stifled a sniffle and wiped the droplets of water pooling on the corners of her eyes.

And then, opened her mouth.

"No, there is no need for that. This here is... the 'Hero' Orc, you see."

< 37. An Orc and a Lady Knight (4) > Fin.

Chapter 130: Traces of a Hero

Sae-Jin the Orc beseeched Kim Yu-Rin with alerting the rest of the world about that white bird, then climbed aboard the pulleyoperated platform.

"We, uh, we are going up."

The two Knights charged with the rescue operation began operating the platform while stealing glances at the Orc. Or, more correctly, at his defensive and offensive armaments. Even a single, casual glance could tell them those were all first-rate items that easily aroused their desires, even if they didn't want to.

The Orc wordlessly tossed pairs of wrist guards and gauntlets at them. The Knights studied each other's expressions and then, the one carrying the spear took the wrist guards, while the dude with fists as weapons took the gauntlets.

Using his fists – one of these Knights used his hands as weapons. There was a golden emblem 'Jin' etched on his chest armour, so it was safe to assume this guy was one of the 'inheritors' of Jin Seh-Hahn's ideals.

"...T, thank you very much."

Both Knights expressed their gratitude after receiving these sudden gifts. And at roughly the same time, warm sunlight could be seen above their heads.

"We'll return to the surface in around ten minutes. Please be patient for a little while longer."

"I understand." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin faced the rescuers with an officious and dignified attitude. The Orc snorted at a just-loud-enough decibel that others might hear him. She frowned slightly after hearing his ridicule and promptly turned all of her attention towards the two Knights. It was the breakout of her jealous streak that wasn't even a real

breakout.

"By the way, it seems like you are from the Jin Mudo school?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Oh. Yes, I converted around nine months ago, although I lack in many areas."

"But, you're a upper Mid Tier already only nine months after the conversion – your talent must be exceptional." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Hahah... thank you for your kind words, but that isn't the case. I simply studied and copied a handful of instructors, that's all. And as luck would have it, this style really suited my tastes and talent level well. My Trait also helped out a great deal."

Jin Seh-Hahn – a man who became a High Tier posthumously, acknowledged as the Highest Tier as far as his fame was concerned, and already a part of the greatest honour known to Knights, the Hall of Fame.

And now, over a hundred thousand disciples around the globe were busy pursuing the path of the martial arts Jin Seh-Hahn had gifted this world, and over a thousand among them had chosen to wield fists after putting their weapons down.

All these people fervently studied, reviewed, tempered themselves and trained hard while watching the films containing Jin Seh-Hahn's movements. To them, Jin Seh-Hahn would remain forever their true instructor.

Because he was so generous with shooting lots of footages for educational purposes, his invaluable martial arts style, such as his battle sense, punching and movement technique, etc, could be preserved in full, becoming the guiding light for all the future generations.

In other words, the traces of a hero had been deeply engraved into the world's psyche.

"Is that how it was? Your teacher was truly a praiseworthy man."

(Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin nodded her head respectfully.

""

The Orc silently scratched his nose. He was inwardly feeling a bit embarrassed by the fact that the existence of Jin Seh-Hahn, an identity he created in order to achieve one of his goals, was able to influence the world far more greatly than he'd ever anticipated.

Before long, the platform finally arrived at the surface. As this was a High Tier hunting ground, there weren't many onlookers and not one reporter present – with the obvious exception of thirty-odd Knights and Wizards. They all gulped nervously after seeing the Orc and his huge Wolf.

"...Are you going now?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

As soon as the Orc climbed on the back of Cornlak, Kim Yu-Rin asked in a miserable voice.

The Orc lightly nodded his head, then signaled to his ride.

Kwahck!!

Cornlak jumped off the platform and into the sky, disappearing from the view almost immediately.

And Kim Yu-Rin watched the back of departing Orc with a pair of lonely eyes.

As soon as he returned home, Kim Sae-Jin had to hear an earful from Yu Sae-Jung. After angrily declaring "I'm also not coming home for a whole month!!", she promptly left the house.

That night, Sae-Jin forgot about sleeping and crafted a necklace. And on the following day, he went to where she was staying and gave it to her as a gift, accompanied with an apology. She was waiting for him at the Guild's dormitory, and when he came, she feigned dissatisfaction but still forgave him.

"...Oh?"

Later that day, after he had successfully received her forgiveness.

Kim Sae-Jin used his notebook PC to check some stuff out about Jin Seh-Hahn online, before running into a particularly interesting website.

It was actually the website for the official Jin Mudo Martial Arts School established after Jin Seh-Hahn's death, but what caught his eyes were the words plastered on top of the screen – [Yi Yu-Jin, 23 years old, Director].

Seeing her title description that said 'former' Knight of Eden, it seemed that she had left Eden after Jin Seh-Hahn's death, and then established the official association as well as the school to carry on with his legacy.

While smiling brightly, Sae-Jin checked the site out, before remembering a certain part of the will, written for him by Kim Yu-Sohn, all of a sudden.

"Excluding my financial assets, everything else will be handed over to my valued and trusted colleague, Yi Yu-Jin."

'Ah. That clause ended up changing a person's life, hasn't it.'

Should he feel proud about this, or feel apologetic...? For now, Sae-Jin carefully searched through the site. Thankfully, he found a page link for 'Sponsorship'. Thinking that he should help out a bit, Sae-Jin reached out and touched the link as it appeared on the hologram.

SFX for a hologram changing

Yi Yu-Jin's face projected in the air became extra large. It was actually a pre-recorded video.

"Hello, my name is Yi Yu-Jin, the current serving director of the School of Jin Mudo."

A brave face, the one Sae-Jin sort of missed a little, greeted him.

"Fuu..."

At the same time.

Yi Yu-Jin spat out a really long sigh of lamentation while holding her head full of complicated thoughts.

There was a ledger full of messy swarm of numbers right in front of her. Revenues were written with a blue pen, while losses were were marked with a red one.

Nowadays, no person alive would keep the books manually like this, but since she was one of those computer illiterate members of the humanity, she had no other choice in the matter.

"And just how do I fill up this hole in the budget...?"

However, one could only spy red letters on the pages of the ledger. It was filled with expenses for maintenance cost, management cost, as well as labour costs, rather than profit.

If she wanted to generate profit forcibly, she probably could. After all, if she hiked the fee for lessons dramatically, as well as strictly enforce the copyright claims on all of Jin Seh-Hahn's footages, and then charge royalties on them, then she'd earn a pretty penny for sure.

If she did all these, then the public might accuse her of selling out Jin Seh-Hahn's legacy, but there should be a steady stream of hopeful Knights who would still pay up. The martial arts Jin Seh-Hahn had created all on his own were more than good enough for that.

But, Yi Yu-Jin didn't want to do this. She could not do it. Because, she believed that she knew the reason better than anyone why Jin Seh-Hahn had entrusted her with carrying out his legacy.

Jin Seh-Hahn used to tell her that she was a lot like him almost all the time. He also added often that she should stop using weapons and rely on her fist, instead.

Back then, she baulked at the idea, saying that he was trying to ruin her career and stuff like that. But after he died, she did put her weapon down and used her fists instead – to very surprising results.

And that was... Her unique Trait, "Level Mastery", had a shockingly great compatibility with Jin Seh-Hahn's martial arts. And so, she used all of the footages of Jin Seh-Hahn, which now belonged to her, to rapidly advance her abilities. It only took her two months to master the martial art. Even the way Eden treated her changed after that.

But it was as if Eden had become addicted to the taste of sweet exposure that the hero Jin Seh-Hahn brought. They requested Yi Yu-Jin to become his clone and appear in front of the cameras for publicity stunts.

Disillusioned by this development, she quit Eden and all by herself, opened the Jin Mudo dojo.

There were already several classes taking place in other Knight Academies across the country, but since this was the only dojo that truly inherited his legacy, her school ended up causing quite a bit of stir. Yi Yu-Jin's reputation as one of Eden's Knights also greatly helped, too – the moment the dojo opened its doors, over 200 hopeful students rushed in to apply.

But... that was it.

The fee for lessons was unbelievably low. And the monthly wages for the instructors were unbelievably high. Within three months of opening, all the funds she had accumulated, as well as every dime she had borrowed, ran out.

But she endured every single day, hoping for donations or sponsors to come through. Jin Seh-Hahn's name was associated with this dojo, after all. Unfortunately, both the big businesses and Knights Orders were cold hearted. They didn't want to sponsor this place. No, they instead blocked other avenues for sponsorships. And then, they 'politely' suggested her to sell the rights to all of Jin Seh-Hahn's footages.

If she sold the rights, then the lucky Knights Order or the big business would monopolise the legacy for big profit, and all the related backlash would fall squarely on Yi Yu-Jin's laps. This was the so-called 'No Risk, High Return', every merchant's wet dream come true – this point alone made corporations and Knights Orders to become uncaring trash in a heartbeat.

"Hey, Yu-Jin. You feeling okay?" (Goh Yun-Jong)

It was then, teacher-c*m-employee Goh Yun-Jong asked her out of worry from her side. Yi Yu-Jin formed a fake smile and nodded her head.

"Of course. Have you ever seen me lower my head to stinking bastards like these a-holes before?" (Yi Yu-Jin)

"We've had an influx of private donations after you uploaded that video. Let's endure it for a little bit longer, okay?" (Goh Yun-Jong)

"...Right. We must endure." (Yi Yu-Jin)

SFX for a weird and repeated ringing of a phone.

Suddenly, the phone began crying out a bizarre ringtone.

"Oi, Goh Yun-Jong! Didn't I tell you to change that stupid ringtone many times already? Are you treating the order of the dojo master like it's empty air or something?!" (Yi Yu-Jin)

"...Sorry. Dunno how to do it." (Goh Yun-Jong)

Goh Yun-Jong smiled and picked the receiver up.

"Hello, this is the central dojo of the Jin Mudo Martial Arts School, and this is the vice director Goh Yun-Jong speaking." Leaving Goh Yun-Jong to take care of the phone, Yi Yu-Jin shifted her gaze back to the pages of the ledger...

"...Excuse me? Ah... Eh? Ah... Eh? No, hang on... Eh? Oh, so that is... Eeeh?!"

...However, Goh Yun-Jong was getting on her nerves. He sounded like he was ordering a bloody takeaway or something with all those "ehs".

"What the hell are you doing??" (Yi Yu-Jin)

"No... Hold on for a moment, please."

After lowering the receiver, Goh Yun-Jong stared at Yi Yu-Jin with a dumbfounded face.

"He wants to become a sponsor." (Goh Yun-Jong)

"Oh, really? That's a good news. I should jot it down on the ledger. How much is it?" (Yi Yu-Jin)

Yi Yu-Jin asked without thinking too much about it. Unfortunately... Goh Yun-Jong's reply was slightly beyond her expectations.

"...\$10 million." (Goh Yun-Jong)

""

Confused by what she just heard, she tilted her head a bit, before her face crumpled in irritation. This sounded like yet another d**n prank call.

"Who the hell is on the line?" (Yi Yu-Jin)

"Hold on."

Goh Yun-Jong picked the receiver up again.

"Excuse me... may I ask where you are calling from? The name of the corporation is... Ah... Y, ye, yes? R, really? Ah, please, wait for one more moment." (Goh Yun-Jong)

Lowering the receiver, Goh Yun-Jong stared at Yi Yu-Jin with a

shocked face.

"He says he's Kim Sae-Jin, the Guild Master of The Monster." (Goh Yun-Jong)

"Ha-ah. Hey, Yun-Jong. How many phone calls from 'Mister Kim Sae-in' did we get in the last couple of months?" (Yi Yu-Jin)

"Ah... well, probably around twenty times?"

"Exactly. Just talk to the guy nicely and hang up the phone already." (Yi Yu-Jin)

"R, right... Ah, excuse me. My apologies, but... I understand your intentions... We don't have any room at the moment to entertain pranks..."

Seeing Goh Yun-Jong literally talk nicely on the phone, Yi Yu-Jin became frustrated and so, she snatched the phone away.

"Hello. I don't know who you are, but stop calling us with these stupid prank calls. If you have time to waste like this, then why don't you go to a school and study something? Seriously, with the world becoming so chaotic lately, must you do something so childish like this? I really don't want to say something like this over the phone, but man, you're pathetic. Pathetic, I tell ya!!" (Yi Yu-Jin)

- ".....Hahahaha..."

Yi Yu-Jin ended up rapidly firing some harsh words due to her frayed nerves, but she could only hear a leisurely laughter coming out from the phone's speaker instead.

- "My apologies for being pathetic, miss. By the way, even if you don't want, please take the money anyways. It's just ten million. Although I'd like to help you out more, that's all the readily available liquid cash I have on me at the moment. So, tell me your bank account number."

"Ha-ah. You can find the account number at the website. If you

want to pull a prank, then at least do some research beforehand, eh? Whatever you set out to do, you should try to do your best! Do you even get what I'm saying over here?" (Yi Yu-Jin)

- "Oh... Is that so? Please wait for a sec."

Yi Yu-Jin shook her head and was about to hang up the phone.

Ttiring-

It was then, a short alarm rang from her mobile phone and its screen lit up suddenly. She took a look at the screen out of habit, and then... froze up on the spot like a statue.

The content of the words on the screen was way too shocking to be believed.

[\$10 million has been deposited to Miss Yi Yu-Jin's account. (260483-38*****)]

"Uh....."

Vvrrrooouung....

At the same time, exhaust notes of several cars could be heard from outside the office window.

- "Employees of The Monster should be arriving there shortly. Please, have a chat with them about signing a more permanent sponsorship or a partnership deal."

As soon as those words ended, Yi Yu-Jin hurriedly ran towards the window to take a look outside. There were four or five ultra-luxurious saloon cars parked on the street, and when their doors opened simultaneously, men in black suits carrying briefcases exited and began walking towards the dojo.

""

Yi Yu-Jin lost all capacity to speak in that moment. Well, there was the logo of 'TM' oh-so clearly etched on their briefcases – the logo of The Monster.

She then recalled the things she uttered out to that man over the phone.

If that guy was indeed Kim Sae-Jin, then...

Her heart began palpitating madly as if it wanted to blow up, and her consciousness suddenly became very dim.

Knock, knock!!

Soon enough, the sounds of people knocking on the doors of the dojo came to her, and...

Plop!!

Yi Yu-Jin collapsed on the floor while showing the whites of her eyes.

- "We are on our way to a hospital."
- "...A hospital? But why?" (Sae-Jin)
- "The director of the dojo collapsed seemingly due to some kind of shock, sir... It must have been psychological, as even taking a recovery potion didn't help her."

"Fut."

Kim Sae-Jin chuckled. She was unexpectedly weak-minded, it seemed.

"Okay, for now, delay the meeting until tomorrow. Since she's sturdier than she looks, she should be fine by then." (Sae-Jin)

- "Yes, sir. I understand."

Sae-Jin ended the call. He then pulled out a brand new sheet to cover the sleeping Yu Sae-Jung's naked body, lying over the torn and messed up bed spreads before heading downstairs to the underground basement.

The unexpected accident caused some delays to his plans, but before the situation could get worse, it was now the time to start the 'hunt' properly. There was no more time to waste.

"First, I should make an armour for the Leviathan Form..."

He produced two ingots of the greatest metal known to men, mithril. Summoned into the open before anyone had noticed it, Cornlak panted as it approached him.

"I'll make an armour for you to wear as well. Wait for it."

Soon, he'd be on his way to 'catch' the Bathory.

< 38. Traces of a Hero > Fin.

Chapter 131: Preparations for the Hunt (1)

"Shall I get started?"

Sae-Jin pulled out and drank a potion he made that was designed to boost a person's mental concentration, sensitivity towards Mana, the 'Magic Strength' stat, as well as various other Manarelated stats for a short period of time.

He then changed into the Orc Form and activated the Smithing Technique on the mithril ingots. With a gentle Wuoong~, mithril ingots melted into thick liquid form.

Next, he changed into the Goblin Form and began the painstaking process of crafting this composite material made out of mithril and Mana into something else.

He added various attributes suitable for an armour, and since the body of his Leviathan Form was getting larger everyday, he also didn't forget to add one more attribute, that of elasticity, as well.

Even if the work seemed simple from a casual glance, every master craftsman carried the mindset of going all out to achieve the best result they could. Kim Sae-Jin too, gave the process all his being and focused 100% on it.

Ttuk-

Two hours later.

As the sweat pooling on the end of his chin fell, the crafting finally came to an end.

[A perfect defensive gear set has been created.]

[Damage Reduction, Level: A]

- The damage incurred by all forms of physical attacks will be reduced by 50%.

[Elasticity, Level: S]

- The material will not tear no matter how big the host grows. Makes the material almost the same as the host's own skin.

[External Mana Storage, Level: B+]

- 3000 units of Mana can be stored within the gear. 'Units' are based on the average amount of Mana found in a human adult. An average adult human possesses 10 units of Mana.]

[Space Distortion, Level: C]

- By consuming Mana, 'space' can be manipulated. The maximum distance applicable: 1 kilometre.

[Time Distortion, Level: F]

- By consuming a large amount of Mana, the flow of time can be manipulated. The maximum limit for manipulation: 1 second.]

The armour with many special attributes imbued with, specifically designed for the Leviathan's use – although it looked more like a piece of cloth rather than a real metallic armour, it was still an incredible thing nonetheless, as several of its features could be easily referred to as minor miracles all by themselves.

"Wow, finally, the time manipulation... Euh-ah-ah... Oh man, feel like I'm dying from this dizziness..."

While feeling very much satisfied by the end product, Sae-Jin plopped down on the cold, hard floor. The effects of the potion had run out, and he was feeling really dizzy thanks to the backlash from the forcefully increased concentration levels.

After wasting another ten minutes doing nothing but recuperating, Sae-Jin changed into the Leviathan Form in order to put on the new battle gear.

Around the 2.5 metre body, he draped the bath towel-like silvery defensive gear. As soon as this towel (?) came in contact with his scales, it clung tightly to him like another layer of skin and completely covered his body. That caused his original pure blue

colour to change into the brilliant silver sheen.

He felt there was a different type of coolness coming off of him when compared to his original appearance, but he nevertheless also sensed that he had gotten stronger than before. Would there be yet another noisy fuss raised, when the world finds him like this, saying that the Azure Dragon had evolved once more?

'...Hmm, should I add, uh, a cape too?'

...He decided not to, since, at this rate he might truly morph into an action figure for children. He did hear that dolls of the Azure Dragon were flooding the markets of late, after all.

"Keung... Khooung... Khreung!! Kkyung..." (TL: what the?!)

While staring at the mirror, Sae-Jin the Leviathan began taking various poses – looking dignified and serious, then sulky and pouting, and even, a cute face. In the middle of this, he suddenly recalled an order he gave to Jo Hahn-Sung about a month ago, so he changed back to human, picked up the phone and called the guy.

Tturu...

Jo Hahn-Sung picked the phone up even before the first ring tone could end.

- "Hello, Guild Master."

"Hello, Mister Hahn-Sung. Do you remember the thing I asked you to do the last time?"

- "....Ah, aha. You mean that one? Yes sir, I do remember. I did not forget it. Not at all, sir."

He did sound like he had completely forgotten about it before Sae-Jin made the call, though... Sae-Jin smirked slightly and continued.

"Well, then. I called you to find out about the progress on the matter."

- "....Ah, the thing is... the Mana Stones of sea Monsters are very rare and are also quite expensive..."

Mana Stones of sea-faring Monsters – meaning, Sae-Jin wanted an underling for his Leviathan Form, so he ordered Jo Hahn-Sung to locate one.

"You haven't found one yet?"

- "No, sir, actually... There is one that hadn't been sold because of its exorbitant asking price, sir. It's been priced way too much compared to what it can be used for, so not even those mad collector types have stepped up to buy it at the moment."

Right away, Sae-Jin stood right up from the chair. To think, a Mana Stone belonging to a Monster that was so expensive, no one was willing to buy it. His body began to ache from the excitement.

"W, what is it? The name of this Monster?"

- "That is..."

Jo Hahn-Sung hesitated slightly. As the CEO of TM, he was burdened with the responsibility of safely handling the financial balance of the company as a whole. However, this Mana Stone...

"Please hurry up."

- "Ah, well, it is... a Kraken, sir."

The Kraken. One could humourously call it a giant squid, but the truth was, it was an incredible creature that could easily occupy a starring role in many legendary tales of yore.

"A K, Kraken, you say?!"

Hearing those brightly-glittering name, Sae-Jin's heart skipped a beat altogether. At the same time, Jo Hahn-Sung's heart also missed a beat as well – what if Sae-Jin asked him to buy it?!

"B, b, but!! The estimated price alone is around \$65 million!! On top of this, the Knights Order is asking for the amount that is nearly ten million more than that, sir!! It's just nonsensically, ridiculously expensive amount."

"Wow, as you say, that's some price tag, alright. But how did they catch a Kraken? Who caught it?"

- "This Kraken used to be nicknamed 'Amari', previously found in the Mediterranean Sea, Master. A Rome-based Knights Order killed it while losing three of its own Knights, so it's more than likely they will not negotiate any terms whatsoever."

Jo Hahn-Sung swallowed nervously. No matter how densely packed the Mana Stone was with the Kraken's unique and special Mana, it was worth no more than \$40 million, when considering the potential financial applications for it. So, \$75 million plus was simply too much...

"Buy it." (Sae-Jin)

SFX for a building collapsing

The heart of Jo Hahn-Sung the CEO collapsed into a helpless heap. 75 million dollars would be the equivalent of one full year of combined wages for the employees...

"However, since we're dealing with a Knights Order here, we can probably exchange items with them, am I right? Tell them I will ready up to 4 armaments and artifacts with attributes they want. Oh, set some limit as well, don't allow them to ask for anything willy-nilly."

- ".....Aaah."

Fortunately, Jo Hahn-Sung had forgotten about something important. It was the fact that Kim Sae-Jin was the proverbial goose laying golden eggs – no, rather, he was the Korean silky fowl that laid mithril eggs...

At least, there was no way the negotiation with any Knights Orders, or even Wizard Towers, would fail.

- "Yes, sir. I understand. I shall send the official request right

away."

"Please. I need it quickly, so give it your all."

After ending the call, Sae-Jin began whistling out loudly.

He thought getting a Monster like a Ness at the end of the day would be perfectly fine enough, but then, even bigger fish had entered the net, instead.

When he add the Kraken to the list of Monsters he could summon, then there would be only one slot left in his 'heart'. But he was planning to leave that one alone for now; well, it was currently reserved for that white bird that could spew out Breath attacks.

*

Around the same time when Kim Sae-Jin was feeling rather chuffed with himself...

Kim Yu-Rin was staying awake throughout the night in a bout of depression.

The night was only growing taller, yet sleep didn't want to visit her. Originally, Knights didn't need a whole lot of sleep in the first place, but since she couldn't catch a wink in the last two days, the situation seemed serious this time.

She felt so lethargic all the time, and didn't feel like being alone any more as well. However, although she did feel this way, she also didn't want to leave her house, either. Plainly speaking, she only wanted to be with one specific person.

She couldn't understand why depression would attack her like this... No, honestly speaking, she knew. She understood the reason plenty well enough.

Her colleagues said something or rather about her mood being a post-operation trauma experienced after surgically removing the parasitic Mana, but...

66 2:

She wanted to see him. The scent that wasn't present in her home, it still lingered within her memories and stung the inside of her nose.

She wondered what would the Orc be doing right now. She already knew that he probably wasn't thinking about her. He was most likely fighting tooth and nail, or maybe, maintaining his mace or the armour in contemplative silence.

She then suddenly thought of 'Kim Sae-Jin'. What was his relationship with the Orc? Just what did he do that made the Orc call him as the 'most important' person? She was curious. Envious. Jealous, even.

SFX for a mobile phone ringing

Her phone rang. But since she couldn't be bothered about anything, she just let the phone be.

For the first time in a long, long while – no, for the first time in 13 years since she entered the Knights Order, she thought that she could seriously do with a vacation, right about now.

Morning of the following day.

The Monster officially announced the partnership deal with the Jin Mudo School led by director Yi Yu-Jin. The contents of the announcement were simple enough.

The Monster honestly admired and believed in Yi Yu-Jin who had inherited the true legacy of the hero Jin Seh-Hahn. So, not ending at just a simple sponsorship, TM would continuously invest into its future as well, going as far as to purchase the surrounding land near the dojo and expand the size of the association and the school itself.

That short but no-nonsense announcement began giving birth to

brand new rumours, when combined along with another announcement made by TM exactly three months ago – regarding the 'new Guild member selection'.

[The chairperson of the 'Jin Mudo School of Martial Arts' Yi Yu-Jin, entering the Monster Guild?]

[Rumours related to The Monster Guild member selection, and candidates receiving attention of the public.]

The mass media folks were already naming the potential candidates and were in the middle of raising a huge fuss. The funny thing was, the guy supposedly 'handing out the dough' didn't even know this was happening at the moment. Meanwhile, names of the Knights he hadn't even considered before were being placed on the list of 'potential candidates'.

Hell, some media companies even interviewed several Knights appearing on that dubious list.

[A potential candidate, High Tier Knight Kim Won-Jong interviewed.]

- Right now, although we're not supposed to say this, you're acknowledged as one of the most likely candidates. So, various betting houses around the world have placed very low odds behind your name... However, what are your thoughts regarding this matter?
- Haha... No, it's not like that. I certainly haven't heard of anything from them. And I also happen to believe that I still lack the ability and temperament right now to become a member of the Monster Guild.
- In that case, even if you're asked to join, you will refuse the invitation?
- Uh-huh-huh. Of course not. How can I do something like that. If I indeed do receive an invitation, that means the Monster Guild has evaluated me highly. Thus, I must put in more effort to meet

their expectations of me.

This was an excerpt from the interview done with Kim Won-Jong, a High Tier Knight from the Daebaek Knights Order. Unfortunately, this man who gave such a cool and humble interview, got busted trying to bribe one of The Monster's employees.

While both within the borders of Korea and outside of it were getting oh-so noisy over the news related to The Monster...

Inside the office of the Vice President of 'Great Wisdom Corporation', inexplicable roars of anger and a bunch of expletives could be heard.

"....God d**n it!! Hey, you f*cking son of a bi*ch, what nonsense is this sh*t!!"

After receiving the news much later than everyone else due to spending the day in a drunken orgy, the enraged Kim Jong-Hyuk cursed out in anger and tried to destroy his own desk. (TL: To all the readers who forgot about this minor character, he first made his appearance in the chapter 73.)

"My sincerest apologies, sir. This event unfolded so suddenly, we couldn't..."

"No, no, but why? Why the f*ck did those bi*ches suddenly do this?"

"The thing is, there is a story that Kim Sae-Jin actually called the dojo and just handed over ten million dollars, just like that..."

"What? That no good son of a bi*ch is doing whatever the hell he likes now, huh? Who the hell does he think he is, a g***** n NPO? A f*cking commoner, who just lucked into a sh*tty Trait thinks his bloodline has suddenly become a nobility or something?! Argh!!"

Kim Jong-Hyuk was actually the ringleader who rallied other big businesses and Knights Orders to pressure Yi Yu-Jin. And since those businesses and even the government tacitly agreed with his idea, this matter was something that would have been resolved, very soon.

After all, when viewed from the government's perspective, to see the unique martial arts created solely by the born-in-Korea, raisedin-Korea hero Jin Seh-Hahn spread around the world without a proper compensation was not something to be too happy about.

"W, what should we do now, sir...?"

"What the, you dipsh*t!! What the f*ck can we do now when things have become like this?! Ah? Wait, didn't this sh*t become such a g****n mess, because of your lack-a-f*cking-daisical fooling around, saying it's all going to happen soon?!"

Kim Jong-Hyuk picked up an ashtray off the desk and threw it on the floor. The more violent he got, his coagulating rage only burned hotter and hotter.

"That, that f*cking son of a bi*ch, I want to kill him myself, but I can't... Argh, f*ck this all to hell!!"

Kim Sae-Jin – because of that b*****d, Kim Jong-Hyuk even suffered the indignity of being sent to prison. Even then, Jong-Hyuk had to cool his rage and let it go after listening to his father's advice. What choice did he have? That b*****d had grown too influential to cut off his head now.

"Get the f*ck out. Get out!! You f*cking useless a*shole. Get the f*ck out of my sight!!"

"M, my apologies, sir."

Kim Jong-Hyuk kicked his personal assistant out of his office. Even this wasn't enough to appease his boiling anger; so, he began destroying his office, instead.

Only after turning his once-dignified office of a Vice President into an unrecognisable junkyard, he regained some of his cool and sat down on one of the surviving chairs. ".....Ah!"

However, he suddenly remembered something. That suspicious-looking Wizard, who asked him if he was interested in 'working together'.

Kim Jong-Hyuk did chase the guy away since he let off that unpleasant aura unique to Vampires back then, but now...

He opened the locked drawer, and then tapped on the blood-colour crystal hidden within.

During the afternoon of freedom, after Yu Sae-Jung went off to work.

Jo Hahn-Sung came to visit Kim Sae-Jin while carrying a certain Mana Stone.

"Here it is."

"...How did this arrive after only one day?!" (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin received the small treasure box that obviously held the Mana Stone inside and tilted his head in confusion. He remembered giving his order only yesterday – no, just over 12 hours ago.

"Ah, the thing is, when you called me yesterday, it was also morning in Rome, so the Knights Order's higher ups had arrived for work by then, Master. That's why I could conclude the talks quickly. When I mentioned the exchange conditions, they just sent the Stone over without asking for anything, and then, they called me up afterwards. They said, 'since the package has been sent, you can't renege on the deal' or something similar to that effect, sir." (Jo Hahn-Sung)

"Haha, that's a relief." (Sae-Jin)

When Sae-Jin cracked open the lid of the box a little, a jet-black beam of light exploded out from the small opening.

"Oh, oh, wow." (Sae-Jin)

He got deeply impressed by the display of the powerful aura, and hurriedly closed the lid.

As expected, inside the chest was...

There was a huge Mana Stone fitting for a Kraken inside, all wrapped in a dignified silk, while patiently waiting for its new owner, Kim Sae-Jin.

< 39. Preparations for the Hunt (1) > Fin.

Chapter 132: Preparations for the Hunt (2)

Kim Sae-Jin hurriedly climbed aboard his car so that he could get to a coastline and 'summon' his new pet, the Kraken.

Since the East Sea would be too full with tourists and vacationers, his new destination was going to be the South Coast.

Vruuoong~

The top-end sports car roared out a throaty exhaust note as it scythed past Yoseon-Dong.

He spotted many robe-wearing Alchemists on every corner of the streets, making him feel the sort-of renaissance Yoseon-Dong was going through on his skin, now that this area was being commonly referred to as the Mecca of all things Alchemy.

However, when he thought about the fact that this change was only possible due to the Goblin Alchemist's actions, he couldn't help but feel excessively proud of himself. Sae-Jin's shoulders danced up and down slightly as he gripped the steering wheel tighter.

He drove past Yoseon-Dong slowly while sightseeing. Then, he happened to spot a very familiar back of a certain Elf Wizard/Alchemist.

She was wearing that snow-white robe Sae-Jin had made personally, so he could spot her way too easily.

But the way she walked seemed a bit strange. She stumbled and faltered about as if she was drunk, and there was a distinct lack of energy to her steps. Sae-Jin tilted his head in confusion. From his memory, her strides were the very definition of a queen bee strutting around in pure haughtiness, so...

Sae-Jin lowered the speed of the car and sidled up next to the person he thought was Hazeline. He could spot the lower half of the face below the hood. The pair of lips were unusually dried up and cracked, but they definitely belonged to Hazeline.

A smile bloomed on Sae-Jin's lips and he winded the window all the way down.

"Miss Hazeline!!"

"Holy *%&#!! M, mommy!?! Kkyahck!!"

His call was way too sudden. Hazeline screamed in panic and fell on the ground face first.

Khwang!

She squarely faceplanted into a manhole cover on the ground. Shocked, Sae-Jin quickly jumped out of the car and rushed to her side.

"Huh. Are you alright?" (Sae-Jin)

""

When Sae-Jin held her shoulders and helped her to stand, he got glared at by a pair of gloomy eyes peeking out from beneath the hood. And just below them, a reddish, swollen nose with two slender streams of blood drizzling down.

"Ouch. That looks like it might hurt." (Sae-Jin)

He quickly pulled out a handkerchief and wiped the blood away. She remained still, choosing to 'feel' his hands touching her face this way and that, before mumbling out in a numbed-out voice.

".....Argh, seriously. You really surprised me.... Why are you screaming out the name of a person so suddenly like that?" (Hazeline) "Oh, my bad. Really, I didn't know you might fall down like this." (Sae-Jin) "...Heu-eup. Come on now, this is just too much..." (Hazeline) Suddenly, tears seemed to well on the corners of her eyes. Even the sobbing whimpers leaked out every now and then, so Sae-Jin could feel the chilly stares of the passersby stabbing him in the back.

"Ah, wait!! F, for now, please get in the car. There are too many

people out here who can recognise me." (Sae-Jin) "No thanks. I'm going home. So, lemme go..." (Hazeline) "In that case, let me take you home." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin shoved Hazeline into the passenger seat, then rapidly slid into the driver's. Fortunately enough, most of the passersby were Alchemists, and they seemed to lose their interest quickly, flowing past the duo in the car like a river's water.

"Fuu... By the way, where was your house again?" (Sae-Jin) "...."

Hazeline didn't say a word, instead simply sat there with a sullen expression, swallowing the blood from her nose.

- "...Would you like some tissue?" (Sae-Jin)
- "...I'll use magic so no need." (Hazeline)
- "Ah... sure." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin wanted to ask why she was still swallowing the blood, if that was the case... but the current mood didn't allow him to utter this bit out.

"Uhm... Then, should we head off towards the Alchemy House, instead?" (Sae-Jin) As a reply to Sae-Jin's inquiry, Hazeline turned the topic around to a completely unrelated matter.

"Why haven't you answered me back?" (Hazeline)

"...Excuse me?" (Sae-Jin)

"You didn't even pick up the phone. For the whole month." (Hazeline) "....Ahh."

His face turned deeply troubled in less than one second. He had no access to his phone during his 'imprisonment' underground, and when he was rescued, there were over 2000 text messages from the employees regarding the administrative matters of TM, so he couldn't even begin to check who sent what.

"I had this thing going on at the time... Really swarmed with

work, I was. W, well, when you return home, please resend the message to me. I'll make sure to reply back to you in less than five minutes, tops." (Sae-Jin) "...."

Hazeline glared at him dumbfoundedly.

'Seriously, this terrible guy is...'

...Would this terrible guy even realise that she couldn't get a proper night's sleep for the past month or so because of worry and anxiety?

She was in despair during that time, wondering if he had finally figured out her true feelings and decided to stay away, or maybe, even had gotten sick and tired of her.

"Didn't Sae-Jung tell you about how busy I was?" (Sae-Jin) "And why would she tell me such things?" (Hazeline) Her voice was quite sharp.

"...K, keheum. Where should we go now?" (Sae-Jin)

"Where were you off to just now?" (Hazeline)

"Pardon?"

"Your destination. I mean, Sae-Jung must be at work now, and it looks like you were going somewhere alone. I will become your traveling companion." (Hazeline) ***

Sae-Jin and his traveling companion arrived at a location in the South Coast where civilians were strictly prohibited from entering.

SFX for waves crashing on the rocks

The South Coast, with her majestic rolling waves, did indeed feature a different type of charm to her when compared to the East Sea.

'What is this feeling?' (Sae-Jin)

However, this whole place felt weirdly familiar. Was this a case

of deja vu? It wasn't that he felt the sense of familiarity with the sea itself – but, a certain 'aura' swimming along with the currents of the ocean was the cause.

"Hello? Excuse me?" (Hazeline)

As Sae-Jin stood there utterly mesmerised, staring at the distant horizon of the South Coast, a certain person standing next to him tapped on his arms.

Of course, it was Hazeline.

"What are you doing?" (Hazeline)

"...Oh. Ah... well, something feels weirdly familiar to me here." (Sae-Jin) Sae-Jin finally regained his senses, and then, pulled out the huge Mana Stone.

"Have you come to the South Coast before?" (Hazeline) Hazeline asked while taking a casual glance at the Mana Stone, before shifting her gaze back to Sae-Jin's face.

"No, I have never come here before... But, from a far away, somewhere really deep underwater... I can feel a sense of belonging." (Sae-Jin) Hidden within the salty aroma of the ocean, there was a faint but persistent aura. He couldn't tell what it was – it felt familiar, comfortable, yet also somewhat discomforting and imparted a sense of uneasiness as well. It may sounded like a contradictory description, but it was the only one he could come up with.

"Perhaps – it could very well be the side effects you mentioned before, your ego assimilating with that of the Monster's. That sense of belonging, could it be because of the sea Monster?" (Hazeline) "....Eh?"

Hazeline asked him with a worried face. What he was sensing right now, at least to him, did not feel like that, but since there was no other plausible explanation available right now, Sae-Jin nodded his head in a somewhat careless manner.

"Well, it could be that." (Sae-Jin)

"...Please, be careful."

Suddenly, worried Hazeline reached out and hugged his arm tightly. The wonderful and otherworldly pair of 'volumes' previously hidden by the thick robe, transmitted their softness to his arm.

"Oh, uh, I'll be fine. For now... let me show you what I was talking about in the car." (Sae-Jin) Sae-Jin quickly assumed a smile and extricated his arm.

"Here we go." (Sae-Jin)

He poured in his Mana into the half-a-football size Mana Stone. Then, the Kraken's Stone changed into black gas and rose up like a dark dusty cloud. And with a single breath from him, the fog-like black energy flowed into his heart.

[The host has absorbed the 'Kraken', the titanic beast of the legendary tales!]

[The Kraken has been absorbed into the Heart of the Warrior.]

[The Kraken has been added to the list of Monsters that can be summoned.]

[To match the host's current Stats, the Kraken's Stats will also be increased accordingly.]

[The current combat level of the Kraken is: (Highest, impossible to measure) grade. However, as the host is currently in the human form, the combat level has been lowered to (High) grade.]

While the alert windows filled up his view, he released the Kraken into the sea.

SFX for sea water exploding

As the water parted violently, a massive squid began rising out from beneath the surface.

The height that easily blocked out the sun; eight 'legs' that were sleek, smooth and fashionably sexy; and a pair of rather languid eyes. (TL: Seriously, Mister Author?!?! Sexy squid legs? Gimme a break...) Truly befitting the title of the worst nightmare of every seafarer out there, this was indeed the frightening Kraken...

"Holy cow... What, what the heck is this...?!" (Hazeline) Two people dazedly stared at the mountain-like creature, while hidden under the immense shade its body had cast.

Hazeline was in the midst of swimming within the sea of shock, while Sae-Jin was swimming in the sea of satisfaction after realising that his new ally's combat strength was 'immeasurable'...

Splash!!

The Kraken suddenly slapped the surface of the sea and caused a huge fountain of water spray.

"Eu-uh!! Hey, stop that!" (Sae-Jin)

Kim Sae-Jin shouted out, but the Kraken didn't stop. As a matter of fact, it rebelled even more fiercely than before.

Splash!! Splash!! Splash!!

"H, hey!! I told you to stop!! Uh-phew!! Phew! Cough!!" (Sae-Jin) "Phuu, Mis, ter, Sae, Jin!! Fhu-woo, fuu-woo. Argh, I can't breathe!!" (Hazeline) It was as if the creature was deliberately targeting Hazeline – she was completely soaked from head to toe, and couldn't even keep her eyes open.

"Hey, you son of a... Fuu-hehp!!" (Sae-Jin)

"Argh!! Hey, just where are you shooting me with wate... Pheuheup!! I told you to stop!!" (Hazeline) When a stream of water hit Hazeline's private area, the Kraken's eyes began arching in a crescent shape. It was one of those smiles that made others wanted to punch the darn thing in the face.

"Mister Sae-Jin!!! This, this motherf*cking squid! You!!"

(Hazeline) Her anguished cries resounded like a lioness's roar.

Almost at the same time, the sea water containing the squid suddenly froze up in an instant. The Kraken panicked and tried to move its body, but seeing that the entire surface of the ocean had frozen stiff, there was no way it would be able to escape from her wrath.

"I'm going to educate you properly now.... Excuse me, Mister Sae-Jin." (Hazeline) She glared into the Kraken's pair of frightened eyes and murmured in a cold, cruel voice.

"I wonder, do you like cooked squid legs?"

*

A short but scary physical punishment later.

"How about giving it a name?" (Hazeline)

"...A name, you say?" (Sae-Jin)

Two people were conversing in front of a squid that was obediently lowering its 'head'.

"I mean, it's not much different from a pet, so how about 'Sahrahng'?" (TL: 'Sahrahng' means 'love' in Korean. Not sure what the author is trying to say here... Nope, no clue whatsoever.) "You wanna call that big thing 'Sahrahng'?" (Sae-Jin) "Yes. Yours and my 'Sahrahng'." (TL: Oh, so that's why.) "...Pardon?" (Sae-Jin)

At her sudden, confession-like declaration, Sae-Jin imperceptibly took a step back.

"Fuhut. You don't have to be that sensitive, you know. Just call it Sahrahng. Even storms are named like this, you see? The stronger a storm is, the softer its name is, as if asking it to become gentler." (Hazeline) "Ah.... Hmm."

Sae-Jin deliberated for a second or two, before nodding his head in agreement.

"Well, sure. Let's go with that." (Sae-Jin)

"So, we're sticking with Sahrahng? Great. Hey, Sahrahng-ah. Come over here. Why were you so naughty just now?" (Hazeline) Hazeline smiled as she approached the giant squid.

Unfortunately, from the point of this squid's view, it was like seeing the advent of an evil monster; Sahrahng began trembling in despair.

Europe.

A powerful giant demon called 'Asmodeus' appeared in Italy. Looking as if it walked straight out of the deepest regions of hell, the demon ceaselessly marched on while burning countless people to death and set aflame to the land around it.

On the places it swept past, only the traces of destructive hell fire remained. Even the skies were blotted out, and the sun was unable to penetrate the darkness.

"...Okay, fine, but why am I being asked to do something about that thing?" (Sae-Jin) Because of this urgent incident, Yu Baek-Song had requested for a meeting with Sae-Jin in quite a bit of hurry.

"They are asking you to, well, convince the Azure Dragon to act on their behalf. Since the Azure Dragon is rated higher in the pecking order, it should be able to subdue the demon pretty easily." (Yu Baek-Song) Meow~

A black cat held in her arms, or some might say imprisoned, threw a tantrum. Yu Baek-Song tried to appease it by clicking her tongues cutely.

Quietly studying this scene, Sae-Jin momentarily imagined Yu Baek-Song lying on his lap like a genuine cat.

It was terrifyingly cute...

"Cough, cough. But, why me convincing the Azure Dragon?"

(Sae-Jin) "Please, stop pretending already. Most people who should know, already know. That Azure Dragon website, we know you're the one operating it." (Yu Baek-Song) "...Ah. Busted."

"Obviously. That is why the President has asked me, while saying that I'm the only person who can talk you into it." (Yu Baek-Song) Yu Baek-Song's shoulders swaggered in delight.

"...What if I refuse?"

"Uh? Uhm... Oh, Italy said they will give you the japtem from the Asmodeus raid as well as 100 million Euros, though?" (TL: The author originally wrote Germany here. Changed back to Italy under the advice of my editor.) "Hmm."

Sae-Jin thought about this. Although the loot from the Asmodeus raid tempted him somewhat, now that he was only mere days away from fighting that Bathory woman, he didn't want to leave the country if he could help it.

However.... Now, he had in possession someone else he could send in his stead.

'The Kraken.'

MEOW!!

It was then – the black cat struggling in her arms bit Yu Baek-Song's finger and broke free, immediately jumping towards Sae-Jin's direction.

"Aigoo~ You like me more than your owner?" (Sae-Jin) Nyah~~

The cat rubbed its body against Sae-Jin, displaying a vastly higher aegyo compared to before.

"What the, seriously now?!" (Yu Baek-Song)

"What's its name?" (Sae-Jin)

"....King of Siberia, Savage Black Leopold Tiger Kaiser the 2nd."

Sae-Jin wordlessly stroked the cat. And it repaid his attention by licking his hand.

"There, there, Blackie. I'm here." (Sae-Jin)

"Call it by its proper name." (Yu Baek-Song)

"......Kaiser the 2nd."

"Full name should be much better." (Yu Baek-Song)

Yu Baek-Song stealthily approached his side.

"But still, I've never seen it show so much aegyo before like this. Definitely, it's that scent of yours..." (Yu Baek-Song) To Yu Baek-Song, it was her first time seeing her 'King of Siberia, Savage Black Leopold Tiger Kaiser the 2nd' display this much aegyo, and so, she stared at the cat busy rubbing its face against Sae-Jin's belly with a pair of dangerously shining eyes, as if she had found the most adorable thing in the whole world.

In the meantime, Sae-Jin carefully reached out and then, began patting Yu Baek-Song's stiff ears and her hair, as her attention was completely stolen by the cat.

"There, there. Here, cutey, cutey..." (Sae-Jin)

The more he patted, the more actively responded her ears and her tail to his touches.

"Want to climb on top of my lap?" (Sae-Jin) (TL: Ooohh, dangerous...) ".....Ng? Did you say something?"

"....Cough. No, uh, I, uh...To Italy, sending Azure Dragon instead of the Kraken... No, wait, I mean, ask them if it's alright for me to send a Kraken instead of the Azure Dragon."

Yu Baek-Song grasped the scruff of Kaiser, which clearly didn't want to leave Sae-Jin's lap, and sat back down on her seat.

"A Kraken? You can even control something like that?" (Yu Baek-Song) "Ah, well, technically, it's not controlling... No, you could say that. It's my servant."

< 39. Preparations for the Hunt (2) > Fin.

Chapter 133: Preparations for the Hunt (3)

On the frontlines near the west of Italy where a fierce battle against the demon, Asmodeus, raged on.

Knights Orders worked together with the regular army personnel and succeeded in drawing the giant demon towards the coast of the famed Mediterranean Sea.

"Has the reinforcement arrive yet?!"

Asmodeus was as tall as the leaning tower of Pisa, and the muscles on its body easily trumped that of an Ogre. However, the nimbleness of this creature belied its humongous physical girth and it could escape unscathed most of the joint attacks performed by countless Knights.

"Wait for a little bit longer!!"

The Rome Knights Order's Master, Brefone shouted out desperately. The deal with Kim Sae-Jin stated that, he would dispatch a Kraken to the Mediterranean, so the Knights should cooperate with the sea Monster to kill Asmodeus. Since it was a Kraken and not an Azure Dragon, the fee they had to pony up wasn't as much, but...

'Just when is that d**n thing arriving here?'

Just as the Rome Knights Order's Master was about to form a big grudge in his heart against Kim Sae-Jin...

The waters of the Mediterranean Sea rippled violently.

Kuuguuuuu...

Thick white foams bubbled up on the ocean's surface, and the Kraken finally rose up high from the depth, blocking out the harsh glare of the Mediterranean sun.

The entrance of the Kraken was as noisy and awesome as if a part of the ocean floor was lifting up to the surface. And sure enough, the incredible size of the Kraken easily overwhelmed the demon, Asmodeus.

SFX for a low-pitched growl

The Kraken glared at Asmodeus for a bit, before wrapping up the fiery demon with its long tentacles. Of course, the demon resisted and spat out hellfire all around it in an instant.

Asmodeus's hellish flames could not be weakened.

Still, 'heat' could be stolen away.

From the suction pads of the Kraken's tentacles, bitterly cold energy rushed out, and these cold winds quickly dissipated the high temperature of the demon's hellfire.

Only then did the demon fall into a state of panic, and began retreating hastily.

"D, do not miss this opening!! Attack!! Attack!!"

With this call, Knights, who had been pushed back time and time again throughout the encounter, rushed in towards Asmodeus.

"That Kraken is our reinforcement!! Attack the demon!!"

"These are the payments we received from Italy, the horns of the demon Asmodeus and its Mana Stone." (Kim Sun-Ho)

Kim Sun-Ho handed over the loot from the Boss raid. Sae-Jin checked them out while he carefully probed Sun-Ho with a question.

"So, how useful was Sahrahng out there?" (Sae-Jin)

During the battle, Sae-Jin was in the Leviathan Form in order to boost Sahrahng's – the Kraken's – Stats; as for the amount of exposure gained through the Asmodeus raid, that was still unknown as Italy was still going through the post-battle recovery phase.

"According to the Rome Knights Order – it was utter domination. They can't stop praising the Kraken's ability to freeze the demon's fire with its ejected ink, Boss." (Kim Sun-Ho)

"...That's a relief." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin nodded his head in satisfaction. There was indeed a merit to giving the Kraken a Mana Tattoo that strengthened its innate 'water' based abilities, as well as attaching a specially-crafted weapon of sorts that could freeze anything at a lightning-quick speed to its suction pads.

"So, that is why, it may be not a bad thing to continue utilising the Kraken like this, Director Kim Yu-Sohn said... no, my father said as much, Guild Master." (Kim Sun-Ho)

"....He did?"

Hearing Kim Yu-Sohn's name out of the blue, Sae-Jin couldn't help but nod his head in a bitter, downbeat mood.

"How is he doing nowadays?" (Sae-Jin)

Currently confined to a hospital bed, the time Kim Yu-Sohn stayed unconscious was getting increasingly longer than compared to when he was awake.

Not too long ago, Sae-Jin went to see the veteran Mercenary, holding in one hand a potion he made with all his focus and effort, a medicine that had a near-miraculous elixir-like effect.

However... Kim Yu-Sohn didn't want to drink it. And Sae-Jin couldn't force the older man to drink it, either.

With both his mind and body in steep decline, Kim Yu-Sohn said that his Trait had stopped working now. Judging from the bright smile etched on his lips, Sae-Jin thought that he looked happy with not one ounce of regret. His dreamscape was now freed from the torturous visions of the incoming future, and it seemed that he was finally given the chance to dive into the memories of his happier past...

"....Doctors said dad has around three months left." (Kim Sun-Ho)

Kim Sun-Ho clenched his fist tightly as he spoke. His voice was trembling.

Feeling the tip of his nose sting with sad emotions, Sae-Jin let off a fake cough and tried to change the subject.

"Keum. I understand. Oh, by the way – what's happening with the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong currently?" (Sae-Jin)

The overwhelming, unparalleled genius who had corrected 23 grimoires in less than a year – the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong fell like a meteor into the stale world of Wizards and magic, becoming its hottest celebrity in no time.

The funny thing was, grimoires 'fixed' by the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong was priced around \$500K, which was considered really cheap – but, the number of corrected grimoires published was quite low; only 100 were printed and were sold, so when one grimoire did come out, books were sold out in the blink of an eye and led to chronic shortage of stocks.

The impassioned requests from the Wizard Towers to reprint more stock went unheard and unanswered, and in the end, they had to bet their very livelihood on getting there first when a new grimoire was about to surface.

It would've been better if these guys learned to share, but unfortunately, Wizard Towers, small minded and closed off from the outside scrutiny, ruled by jealousy and pettiness, would never do something like that.

And so, time had flowed steadily by and the number of corrected grimoires published by the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong now reached 23.

Thanks to the peculiar arrangement described above, not one Wizard Tower around the world possessed every single edition of these valuable books in their collections.

If they happened to have the 1st book from the series within their 'Wizard of Bangbae-Dong's grimoires collection', then they wouldn't have the second or the third book, and if they had the fourth, then they would be missing fifth and the sixth. It was like those annoying missing pieces of puzzle, really.

"Hahah... Thanks to 'him', the stock of our Guild has increased by another notch, Boss. They are saying, 'The Monster Guild's members-only library has all the volumes of the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong's grimoires, something no other Wizard Tower has'."

Kim Sun-Ho pulled his phone out and showed off the current situation to Sae-Jin personally.

[(Breaking News) The Wizard of Bangbae-Dong's corrected grimoire number 24, scheduled to go on sale during sometime in August. Wizard Towers understood to be in a fierce competition already.]

- Holy moly. How can anyone write a grimoire this quickly? He must be a real super genius.
- You will find more Wizards in Bangbae-Dong thanks to the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong. \neg \neg . My uncle-in-law who runs a pub there is loving it. He says they spend money like there's no tomorrow.
- BTW, because all the grimoires are written in Korean, Wizards are tripping over each other to learn the language. The reason for all those language cram schools popping up in Bangbae-Dong is because of all the foreign Wizards found there. $\exists \exists$ One of my friends is an instructor. Says that the foreign Wizards list reading the original versions in Korean as their reason for applying. \exists \exists .

Sae-Jin chuckled as he read the comments, before handing the phone back.

"I guess it's par for the course, really. This Wizard of Bangbae-Dong has done the same work other Wizards might take ten years to do in less than one." (Kim Sun-Ho)

"Haha... Is that so? Oh, right. Mister Sun-Ho, there is this thing... Ah, never mind, don't worry about it. Well, shall we end the meeting here? I should return to my other work right about now." (Sae-Jin)

The plans to get rid of the Bathory woman was, for now, a secret even from Kim Sun-Ho.

"Yes, boss. Understood. See you later."

Kim Sun-Ho didn't think about it too much and vacated his seat.

As soon as he left, Sae-Jin headed off towards the underground private training facility with the loot from the Asmodeus raid.

After absorbing the Mana Stone of Asmodeus, Sae-Jin was able to gain one more Skill.

[Hellish Flames of Retribution]

[Skill Proficiency Level: D]

– Damage from fire-based attacks will be negated, and when performing attacks based on fire, 'Flames of Retribution' will be added. These flames will not go out unless the caster wills it. (TL: Huh. Is this a version of 'Amaterasu' from the Sharingan?)

It sure was a wonderful Skill, indeed – since, he could now use flame-based Breath attacks whether he was in the Leviathan Form or in the human's appearance. And not only that, his flames would be upgraded to 'Flames of Retribution', even.

Hell, even the name "Breath: the Flames of Retribution" sounded really, utterly domineering, didn't it?

As for the demon's horns, Sae-Jin grinded it down to make potions. This potion would enter not only the heart and the muscles, but even Mana flowing in one's body and increase the overall power of its drinker by two times or more.

"With this much..."

Sae-Jin felt this should be enough preparation for the upcoming hunt, so he pulled out the communication crystal connected directly to the Nosferatus.

"...Can you hear me?"

There was a moment of static, before he could hear Lillia's voice coming from the crystal.

- "Yes, I can hear you."

"I'm more or less done with my preparations. What about your side?"

- "…"

There was a gap of silence.

- "We are also ready, but... I must express my concern in regards to the way this matter being rushed a great deal. I must reiterate that our target, the leader of the Bathory House, is not someone you can think lightly of. No, you could become one of her victims, instead."

"However, we do have the scale of an adult Leviathan, don't we?"

The fully-grown Leviathan, the Monster of the sea that could give a real dragon a run for its money.

If Sae-Jin in his Leviathan Form could eat that scale, then he'd be able to 'understand' Mana and all its majestic glory contained within, and use that to evolve rapidly. Then, someone like that Bathory woman wouldn't even be a threat any more.

- "If this is your wish... We understand. We will deploy our agents and try to lead our target towards the East Sea when there aren't that many people there – during the December period."

- "Isn't that too far away?"
- "Not at all. We need to set up an isolation barrier as well as other preparations there in the meantime."

"Hmm. Okay, then. Got it."

As Sae-Jin was about to end the communication, he heard Lillia's voice continuing on from the crystal.

- "Oh, before you go, is it possible to hire a Wizard with excellent abilities as a backup?"
 - "...A Wizard? Why?"
 - "We will be needing a Wizard that you can trust."

""

Sae-Jin thought about this for a second, before recalling a certain woman that fitted the description 'a trustworthy and skilled Wizard' rather perfectly, and nodded his head.

A week later, within The Monster's Guild HQ building.

Inside the members-only library, Hazeline was busy poring through the pages of grimoires 'authored' by the famed Wizard of Bangbae-Dong.

"Ohh. So, moving it over here makes it easier..."

Finally understanding why other Wizards were singing 'Bangbae-Dong, Bangbae-Dong' all the time, Hazeline's lips formed a 'O' shape, showing how impressed she was.

And so, while completely oblivious to the fact of Sae-Jin being the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong, Hazeline let out her exclamation of admiration at the grimoires' user friendliness and improvements that could be felt almost immediately. But then...

"Unni? What are you doing here?"

Before she had the chance to react, Yu Sae-Jung approached her. Yu Sae-Jung took a glance at the front cover and her eyes went extra round.

"The Wizard of Bangbae-Dong... Is this the grimoire published by that famous Wizard?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Uh? Oh, uh... Yes, it is. I already know all these spells, but since I heard that they were corrected for better efficiency, so..." (Hazeline)

Hazeline stealthily closed the grimoire. She felt oddly embarrassed all of a sudden – well, she was someone who had left the world of Wizardry and magic a long time ago, yet here she was, busy studying the works of a junior who had only made his "official" debut less than a year ago.

"But why a sudden interest in grimoires?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

The instincts of woman possessed by Yu Sae-Jung floated a question mark. She even took a seat next to Hazeline.

"Well, I, uh, I was a Wizard before, you know?" (Hazeline)

Hazeline became extremely awkward, and felt apologetic too, while facing Yu Sae-Jung. The emotions she had for Sae-Jin might be love from her perspective, but from Yu Sae-Jung's point of view, it could only be seen as malicious emotions instead.

"Hmm... Isn't this grimoire suppose to be very rare?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Y, yeah. I suppose it is? I got curious, you see? Whenever this Wizard publishes something, it goes out of stock almost immediately, right? So, how could our Guild..." (Hazeline)

"...Well, this is within my Oppa's abilities, of course~~."

Yu Sae-Jung spoke with an obviously pleased smile on her face. Meanwhile, Hazeline tasted a somewhat bitter-than-bitter aftertaste while nodding her head powerlessly. "Well then, I should start studying, too..." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Slightly lost within the sense of victory, Yu Sae-Jung didn't leave Hazeline's side. Instead, she pulled out her notebook PC, several textbooks, and even donned a pair of very intellectual-looking glasses.

SFX for doors suddenly opening

Suddenly, the doors to the library were pushed open very hard.

"Argh, what the?!"

Yu Sae-Jung hurriedly took off her glasses and turned her head around to look. At the same time, a huge shouting exploded out like a clap of thunder.

"My name is Yi Yu-Jin, a new member of the Guildddddd!!!"

"*&%#!! What the?! Who the heck is she?" (Hazeline)

Hazeline blocked her ears and frowned deeply.

"That girl... Ah, right. We did pick her as the new member of the Guild..." (Yu Sae-Jung)

The Guild held a 'new members selection' which ended up causing much consternation in the country not too long ago. It was such a hot topic of news that, The Monster and around 13 Knights Orders even held a joint contest among the populace to vote for who could be a good fit for The Monster Guild.

"Yi Yu-Jin... Ahh, so she got selected." (Hazeline)

Although an official announcement hadn't been made yet, Sae-Jin did inform them of the selection already.

Yu Sae-Jung got up from her chair and walked towards Yu Yu-Jin.

"Congratulations." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Ahh, yes!!! Thank you very much!!!" (Yi Yu-Jin)

"Let's get along well together, you and I." (Yu Sae-Jung)

...And behind Yi Yu-Jin, Sae-Jin was walking in through the door as well. His body trembled imperceptibly when he spotted Yu Sae-Jung just now.

"Uh, Oppa? Whatcha doing here?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"...Oh, uh, I was..." (Sae-Jin)

....He came here to discuss some very serious matters with Hazeline, actually. He told her over the phone, "Help me", but hadn't told her all the details yet.

"....Here to introduce Yi Yu-Jin to you all." (Sae-Jin)

But since he didn't expect to spot Yu Sae-Jung to be with her, he hastily used Yi Yu-Jin as a suitable excuse.

"Well then, you should break the ice among yourselves." (Sae-Jin)

"Ah, Oppa, wait." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"...What? Why?" (Sae-Jin)

When Sae-Jin tilted his head, Yu Sae-Jung walked closer right up to his face.

She stood on the tip of her toes, wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him full on the lips. And it wasn't just a little peck, either. It was so intimate that Yi Yu-Jin, who was standing next to them and witnessing the tongue-wrangling going on in its full glory, couldn't help but have her face dyed in crimson red.

"....What was that all about, out of the blue?" (Sae-Jin)

The kiss ended after one full minute and Sae-Jin awkwardly asked.

"Just. I wanted to do it, is all."

Yu Sae-Jung giggled and tapped on his shoulder. He scratched his cheek and left the library.

Meanwhile, all Hazeline could do was to bite down hard on her

teeth while staring at that torturous sight.

""

She was so envious. Her heart ached, too – as if a blunt knife stabbed it and was twisting this way and that.

On top of that, she even unconsciously imagined something she shouldn't have – Sae-Jin and her kissing. If it was her instead of Yu Sae-Jung, then she wouldn't have to stand on tiptoes, either...

She held her fountain pen real tightly, until it was this close from breaking into pieces. She even felt hints of tears welling up.... So, so jealous, envious, and the mere fact that she couldn't say anything made it doubly more difficult...

"Hm, hmm~~."

Yu Sae-Jung hummed as she sat back down next to Hazeline.

Hazeline did her very best to hold everything back in and concentrated on the grimoire. Meanwhile, Yu Sae-Jung took a sneaky and quick glance at her, and a hint of smile formed on her lips.

< 39. Preparations for the Hunt (3) > Fin.

Chapter 134: Preparations for the Hunt (4)

'Breath'.

A type of 'magic' where Mana in its most elementary form was fired out.

The mighty dragons apparently loved using it in the distant past, and thus this attack became a romantic ideal of sorts, but still, the level of destructive power each Breath attack possessed was definitely horrifying to behold.

Sae-Jin came to the Monster field to train his own Breath that would no doubt become one of his main attacks whether he was in the human's appearance or as a Leviathan – all the while suddenly choosing to wear a robe usually worn by other Wizards while carrying a single elegant wooden stick thingy and accompanied by a drone fitted with a camera.

It was shaped like a lengthy, slick pole, and the tip was rounded off – indeed, this was a magic staff crafted with Kim Sae-Jin's own hands. From afar, it kinda looked as if he made it out from a broken branch of a tree, but when inspected close by, there was this 'vintage' charm to its overall shape.

On top of this, Sae-Jin also attached a ruby-like jewel on it that featured the attributes of 'Mana Amplification' and 'increase spell's power' – in terms of market value, this staff would easily cost nearly \$30 million. Well, Wizards tended to have a rather large spending habit, so...

"...Mm."

He was making his way towards the upper Mid Tier hunting grounds, dressed up as... the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong. He even checked to make sure the drone was working fine, since the footage captured would be uploaded to the blog, too.

He deliberately came here during the sunset, and sure enough,

there weren't all that many people around who were still out hunting. Still, Sae-Jin covered his face even more with the thick hood and roamed around the hunting ground.

Kkkkiiiieeeeck-!!

When he walked around for 30 minutes or so, he finally ran into a fairly substantial Monster that dominated the skies, the Wyvern. If he found something like a Griffin, fine, but a Wyvern, a High Tier Monster, in the upper Mid Tier hunting ground? It was probably a typical example of how chaotic the activities of Monsters had become lately.

"Well, this is good."

Sae-Jin pointed the staff at the Wyvern and focused his Mana flowing inside the body onto his new baby. Reddish Mana focused on the ruby, and this crimson flow gradually morphed into flames while boiling hotly, and then...

KWAHAHAHAHAA!!!

...It twisted and distorted as it pounced upon the airborne Wyvern.

The Breath: Hell's Flame of Retribution fired by Sae-Jin on the ground only needed less than one second to reach the Wyvern.

Kkiiieeeck...

The flames of hell engulfed the poor Wyvern in one go. The creature let out a tragic scream of suffering as it flapped its wings.

Too bad, the devilish flames didn't want to go out, no matter what.

Wuuuooong—

Sae-Jin gathered Mana around his staff again. This time, rather than red colour, the flow of Mana emitted a pure white hue, like the surface of ice.

The chilling Mana pooling around the staff rapidly froze the

world. The molecules of air froze into tiny frost particles and scattered away, settling on the surface of his robe as a thin layer of ice.

SFX for solid ice blocks cracking open

As the land Sae-Jin stood on froze up in white, a Breath of freezing storm rushed out from the staff this time around.

This cold Breath even managed to freeze the sky as it reached the hapless Wyvern. And when it was combined with the hell's flames, they caused a massive explosion.

KWAHAHANG!!!

The big and powerful Wyvern was reduced to ashes and bits of frost from the combined might of flames and bitter chill, and the remains drifted down to the ground.

"....Ho-oh."

As its body had been completely annihilated, there was no loot to recover, but still, this show of power had truly impressed him. Even with the human form it was this amazing, so how powerful would it be in the Leviathan's Form? His confidence was soaring higher.

"I wonder how good was the footage..."

He turned his attention towards the hovering drone and muttered to himself.

"What types of reactions would they show...?"

Nowadays, Sae-Jin was deriving much pleasure at watching the surprised faces of those overly proud Wizards, as well as at those two faced people who publicly tried to cut down the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong out of jealousy but inwardly coveted what he possessed.

What would their reactions be like, after he uploads this video on the blog? Would they deny the truth right in front of their eyes and claim that it was the might of the staff? Or would they accept the gap in their abilities and his, and kneel down in defeat? Of course, judging from the prior haughty actions of many Wizards so far, most of them would choose the former option.

"...Mm?"

While he stood there feeling rather pleased with himself, a text message from Hazeline arrived.

[Sae-Jung just left. We can talk now.]

Sae-Jin sent back his own short reply and headed back to the exit.

After meeting up with Hazeline, Sae-Jin told her everything in detail.

The horrifying future that Kim Yu-Sohn's visions revealed; as well as cooperating with an offshoot of Vampires called Nosferatus in order to stop that future from happening.

This information was a sensitive top secret that should never be told to anyone, but the person hearing it was Hazeline, and Sae-Jin felt less of a pressure precisely because of that.

That was how trustworthy and reliable a person she was.

""

After hearing all of this, Hazeline's eyes opened up extra round and all she could do was to open and close her mouth repeatedly like a goldfish, completely speechless.

Actually, she couldn't say anything. From her point of view, what Sae-Jin told her just now sounded like a surrealistic fantasy.

"...Would you like to help me?" (Sae-Jin)

"....Eh? W, wait.... Hold on. S, so, if I try to unpack everything

Mister Sae-Jin has told me..." (Hazeline)

Hazeline swept her wet hair back, seemingly soaked through because of all the cold sweat pouring out of her forehead.

"In the future, our world will head towards apocalypse, because of the Vampires... and in order to stop these Vampires, we need to ally ourselves with other Vampires and kill their leader... Am I right?" (Hazeline)

"Hmm... More or less. But, please, do try to separate Nosferatus and Vampires apart during our conversations. It might get confusing." (Sae-Jin)

Of course, Sae-Jin still found this group of Nosferatus not that easy to fully trust. But, he couldn't forget the fact that they handed a Leviathan's scale over to him. By taking into consideration this scale being the real deal, somehow, they didn't seem like totally evil beings that were impossible to work with.

That Lillia woman even allowed Sae-Jin to dispatch his agents to the hidden sanctuary while saying, "If we show even an inkling of betrayal, you can wipe us all out with your strengthened Leviathan Form after ingesting the scale."

"S, so, these Nosferatus..." (Hazeline)

To Hazeline, who was unaware of these events, all Vampires were exactly the same, regardless of what they were called.

"Us Elves are enemies with Vampires, you know..." (Hazeline)

She looked somewhat in agony as she covered her face.

The Mafia, the Triads, the Yakuza, rebels and revolutionaries, government forces, etc. etc... She might have received lots of 'commissions' from many different clients in the past, but an operation of this scale, and working together with Vampires no less, was a first even for her.

"...If you don't feel up to it, you can always decline. But, you

must keep everything you've heard today as a secret," said Sae-Jin.

Suddenly, Hazeline lowered the hands covering her face, rested her chin on one, and with a strange look in her eyes, stared at Sae-Jin.

"...As a secret?" (Hazeline)

"Yes, of course. With the exception of you, Miss Hazeline, there isn't anyone else I can talk to about this. You're the first person to hear this secret among all my acquaintances."

Although the famous Elven trait of never betraying other's trust played a part in his decision, Sae-Jin also implicitly believed in Hazeline as well. Even if he didn't use the Eyes of the Wolf and see into her heart, she was still a person he knew the longest after all.

"....Even Sae-Jung doesn't know?" (Hazeline)

"Eh? Oh... Yes. T, that's right."

Before he could answer, though, he did become a bit conscious of this decision. The reason why he didn't tell Yu Sae-Jung was because this operation was going to be very dangerous. Depending on how it was interpreted, it could be seen as a sort of discrimination.

"Is that so...?" (Hazeline)

But it was a weird thing – her eyes regained her calm demeanor, her lips arched in a slight grin, and even her nostrils flared just a little. Her complexion puzzlingly showed how pleased she was.

Sae-Jin scratched his head while asking her.

"Have you come to a decision?" (Sae-Jin)

"...By the way, if I decide to participate, then doesn't that mean we will have to see each other more often from now on~? You did say we need to come up with a plan." (Hazeline)

While twisting the ends of her hair, Hazeline feigned disinterest as she asked on the sly.

"Yes, probably we will. But, if you want, we could communicate using those communication crystals..." (Sae-Jin)

"Nope. If I do this, then I should do it properly. In this world, I hate doing things in half measures the most, you know." (Hazeline)

Hazeline suddenly stood up from her seat with a serious face.

"I will do it. Not only are you the one asking me, I also want to do something this big and crazy, too. Saving the world – doesn't that sound just cool? Being born as an Elf woman, I should do at least something this grand once before I die." (Hazeline)

""

Sae-Jin gazed at her and formed a smile.

"Thank you." (Sae-Jin)

Then, he pulled out a crystal from the drawer.

"Lillia? The Wizard agreed to do it." (Sae-Jin)

"...Huh? We, we are doing this right now?" (Hazeline)

"Please take a seat. We'll explain the plan." (Sae-Jin)

"...Sure."

As soon as Hazeline sat back down, Lillia's voice came out from the crystal.

- "Thank you very much, Wizard-nim. We have all climbed aboard a ship that will cross a very dangerous sea. And the first obstacle we must cross is, to kill a certain woman who will become the future ruler of all Vampires."

"Okay, I know that... Mister Sae-Jin has explained to me in detail already."

- "That is a relief. Then, allow me to explain the plan in greater detail."

The plan was thus:

Firstly, Nosferatus would set up an isolation barrier that separated a small area of the East Sea from the rest of the world; then inside it, they would ready countless magic traps and Mana Stones.

And when Sae-Jin played his part well and lure Bathory into this barrier, those traps would activate – then, Hazeline's turn would come next.

What she needed to activate was the artificial heart Sae-Jin got from defeating the doll of the Vampires some time ago.

By activating the spell contained within the heart, the one that disabled the flow of Mana temporarily, and using it against Bathory, then in that moment, she should become incredibly weak. Pour countless magic attacks on her and with them, kill her.

In theory, it would only take a blink from the beginning of the operation to its conclusion – probably less than three seconds. However, Lillia was of an opinion that, if they failed to kill the Bathory woman within that time frame, the odds of their plan failing was over 70%, so she added something else.

- "It is regrettable that most of us, Nosferatus, are Wizards... I feel that it could be to our advantage if we have one more person, a Knight, that can delay Bathory physically."

Lillia began mumbling as she found it unfortunate.

"A Knight, you say?" (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin's eyes brightened. If they were talking about a Knight... then he could think of someone. Someone who went on a vacation during these Monster incident-laden turbulent times, saying that she couldn't work due to the post-op depression from the operation – Kim Yu-Rin.

- "Yes. Even with a lot of people, a disorganised rabble will only end up getting in our way – so, I believe a talented Knight would be better for us."

".....Hmm."

Sae-Jin fell into a dilemma.

Meanwhile, Hazeline was next to him, unable to compose herself.

He definitely said he wouldn't get Yu Sae-Jung involved in this. That meant, the most powerful person of the remaining Knights could only be...

At his follow-up words, Hazeline's heart sank to the bottom.

"I could float the idea past the Knight Kim Yu-Rin." (Sae-Jin)

The relationship between human Sae-Jin and Kim Yu-Rin wasn't all that deep, unless he was in the Hero Orc Form.

However, she was someone with a great sense of righteousness as well as holding unshakeable ideals of a Knight. If he explained to her that, by killing Bathory, they would put an end to the Monster incidents, she might agree to do it without much resistance with that line of persuasion...

It was then, Hazeline grabbed the arm of deliberating Sae-Jin.

"...Excuse me, Mister Sae-Jin?" (Hazeline)

"Yes?"

She could only contort her body with a uncomfortable face, unable to say a single word.

Not only did she feel ashamed of the past incident with Kim Yu-Rin, but also, she didn't want to discuss her past love life in front of Kim Sae-Jin, either.

"What's the matter? Are you perhaps uncomfortable with Miss Kim Yu-Rin?" (Sae-Jin)

Nod, nod.

"Well, in that case.... there is someone else who isn't a Knight, but probably stronger than regular Knight anyway – will that be fine?" (Sae-Jin)

- "Yes. What we are looking for is a person who can physically delay Bathory, even for a brief second."

In gaming terms – what they were looking for was a tanker. While grinning to himself, Sae-Jin recalled the silhouette of someone who'd never be taken to be a tanker – a small white cat, Yu Baek-Song.

"What about Knight Joo Ji-Hyuk? I hear he got promoted to the High Tier." (Hazeline)

Hazeline asked him cautiously.

- "Oh... You're right. We also have Mister Ji-Hyuk, don't we?"
- If you're talking about 'Joo Ji-Hyuk', do you mean the Master of Greatswords?
 - "Yes, that's him." (Sae-Jin)
 - "He should be a good fit, in that case."

Satisfied by the amazing quality of his personal connections, Sae-Jin smiled and wrote down several names on the memo pad. Of course, it was unknown whether any one of these people might participate in something this dangerous.

"Whew-woo..."

Leaving Hazeline to breathe a sigh of relief, Sae-Jin was about to make a call to Joo Ji-Hyuk on the phone.

"Ah, right, there's something I should do first. Nearly forgot about it."

Then, he suddenly remembered something, and pulled out a magic staff stored in his body via Spiritualisation.

This staff looked a bit similar to his own, but it was refined and beautified further to better suit Hazeline. He also went with a diamond instead of a ruby for the decorative jewel, even.

"Here, take this." (Sae-Jin)

"...What... is this?"

"It's a present. For deciding to work with us. It's got a really powerful amplification attribute added in." (Sae-Jin)

"Ah... But, it looks so expensive..." (Hazeline)

She dazedly studied this beautiful staff for a while, before swallowing down her nervous saliva and gently embraced it.

"Haha... Get friendly with that fella soon. Since it's one of the best I've made yet, it'll listen to you very well." (Sae-Jin)

Hazeline found Sae-Jin busy emphasizing 'his best' quite attractive, and she felt this powerful urge to hug him right this moment.

"Huh....?"

No, she ended up doing it for real.

Her body acted before her mind could.

She embraced Sae-Jin tightly, while slowly whispering to him.

"...Thank you."

< 39. Preparations for the Hunt (4) > Fin.

Chapter 135: The Wintering (1)

"....Miss Hazeline?"

Sae-Jin's voice slowly settled down in the office where there were only two people present.

But, Hazeline didn't release her embrace. Instead, she proceeded to rub her face all over his chest, and fully savoured this sudden bout of happiness her impulsive actions had brought along.

""

Sae-Jin blankly stared Hazeline as she hugged him. Her faintly trembling shoulders seemed to indicate her fears of the consequences, yet the strength of her two arms squeezing his waist said otherwise.

- "Is there something the matter?"

Lillia's voice came out of the communication crystal, right then. Judging from the way the tone of her words climbing up towards the end, it seemed that she was tilting her head on the other side of the line.

- "Uhm... Ah, what was today's date again... I, well, I should get going."

Lillia said some weird stuff before ending the communication. Today was Saturday, but still, did she have something to do?

Sae-Jin did his best to think of inane and unrelated things in order to calm down both his shocked mind and the body. But that much-needed calmness continued to evade him, so he even took several deep breaths.

"Fuu-woo..."

In all honesty, it wasn't as if he hadn't foreseen just what kind of feelings she had for him. The reality was... he just didn't want to think about it too deeply.

It sure was a cowardly way of dealing with the matter, but he couldn't help it. Even though they could not be in a romantic relationship, she was still a very precious person to him. So, no matter what, he didn't want to lose her. In the end, he maintained his denial that her feelings towards him were not that serious, that it was just an intense form of friendship, instead.

But didn't someone say this before? That there could never be a simple, platonic 'friendship' between men and women?

"Miss Hazeline?"

Sae-Jin called out her name again. But she didn't want to listen to him.

"...Miss Hazeline."

When his voice hardened ever so slightly, Hazeline's shoulders shook visibly. Only then, she released the hug and hung her head. Then, while sniffling a reddened nose, she spoke with a trembling voice.

"....I'm sorry. I acted without thinking, because I loved this staff so much... I'm so grateful.... Something inside me just wanted to burst out so suddenly, you know? I couldn't hold it back... You know already, yes? That Elves are like this. That was why I..."

She blamed the innate personality of her race for her impulsive actions.

And while seeing her like this, Sae-Jin gritted his teeth.

Hazeline was an important person to him, someone he cherished greatly. No matter how selfish he sounded, he didn't want to lose her.

And so... he had to undo the hardened expression, and had to forcibly squeeze out a smile. He needed to pretend that he wasn't any wiser and talk to her. He knew that he was truly a rotten son of a bi*ch, but in this very moment, this was the only thing he could do or say to her.

".....Ha, haha. You like this staff... that much?" (Sae-Jin)

With a calm voice, he gently placed the staff back in the hands of Hazeline who didn't seem to know what to do next.

"It's.... a really expensive and a great staff, so please don't lose it." (Sae-Jin)

""

Hearing his words, Hazeline bit her lower lip and her grip on the staff tightened as if she was trying to crush it.

She could faintly tell the hidden meanings of his words. She could understand. But she hated it. She didn't want to acknowledge it, either.

That's why she didn't answer him, but instead, continued to stare at the floor while thinking about the future at the same time.

Looking at him from afar, or to stay right by his side?

Under the condition of 'Can't have him', which of the two options would prove to be more torturous?

A puzzle seemingly impossible to decipher. If both propositions were placed on a scale, they would most likely maintain equilibrium for all eternity.

But, right now, she had to give her answer to him. And... being born as an Elf, perhaps this was an unavoidable inevitability for her.

To hold a conversation with him in the same room, and at minimum, still get to see him... She wasn't sure if these were enough to satisfy herself, but still... it would be better than looking at him from afar. Looking at him only... Now that would be the worst form of torture to endure.

That was why, she had to forcibly squeeze out something past her totally blocked up throat.

".....Yes. Of course. I'll... never lose it." (Hazeline)

Unexpectedly, her desperately squeezed-out voice didn't shake. But Hazeline didn't raise her head. Although she did want to look into his eyes, she also didn't want to show her tearful expression as she was still fighting hard to hold back her tears.

And Sae-Jin gently grasped her hands, as gently and considerate as possible.

"Thank you." (Sae-Jin)

Hazeline nearly burst out into tears, then.

Yes. Let's be satisfied with only this. Take it as a punishment, and be happy with the fact that I can stay by his side. Be grateful rather than greedy. Be satisfied rather than sad. Let me not repeat the mistake of the past by becoming too greedy... (Hazeline)

"No, not at all." (Hazeline)

Hazeline wiped the corners of her eyes and raised her head. Although her reddened eyes and nose must've looked pretty pathetic, she still smiled.

"Instead.... I should be the one thanking you." (Hazeline)

After Sae-Jin managed to pacify Hazeline and sent her home, he returned to his own place late at night. Yu Sae-Jung was already asleep, while holding a long pillow that must've been a substitute for him. It was a sight adorable enough to bring a grin to his tired face.

Sae-Jin sat on the corner of the bed and gently stroked her hair. He sat there and did this for the next five minutes, before leaving a light kiss on her forehead and he got back up.

The next destination he headed to was a small desk in the corner of the bedroom.

As soon as he sat down, he pulled out his diary from the drawer.

Writing a diary was a habit he formed a long while ago. He didn't

write on it everyday, but he made sure to write on it at least once or twice a week – so he could potentially stop his humanity from disappearing, buried away by the instincts of the Monsters within him.

He remembered starting this habit the day after he lost his self control and murdered that Vampire a couple of years ago. Of course, he applied a special magic treatment on the diary so no one else could read it by accident.

"Fuu-woo."

He picked up the pen, and began committing each and every letter on the page as if he was spitting out a long sigh.

It hadn't been long, before the sound of rustling came from the bed. Sae-Jin quickly finished writing on the diary and put it back inside the drawer.

"...Oppa, you were writing on the diary again?"

Hearing the sleepy voice, Sae-Jin turned around to look, and saw Yu Sae-Jung with her messy bed hair gazing at him with halfclosed eyes.

"Yeah. But I'm done now."

He smiled thinly, and slowly approached her side. Her still-sleepy eyes followed him in a daze. He then lightly grasped the back of her neck and gave a light kiss. But soon enough, she placed her hands against his chest and pushed hard, stopping him. When he tilted his head in confusion, she abashedly murmured her reasons out in the open.

"I've got bad breaths... I just woke up now, you idiot." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"...Fut. You know I'm fine with that." (Sae-Jin)

"But I'm not fine with it, though."

She cutely glared at him and blew into her palm, then smelled

the resulting odour. It must not have been that bad, since she let out a sigh of relief.

"Argh, you are so d**n adorable!"

This really was the unendurable cuteness. That was why Sae-Jin jumped right into her arms.

"Wait!! I told you I just woke up.... Ah, ahat!! That tickles, tickles~~!!"

She initially put some resistance, but she couldn't win against his mischievous and wicked ways that concentrated on conquering all her erogenous zones.

Her silk pyjamas powerlessly got ripped off, and as it turned out, she wasn't wearing any under garments.

That night, Sae-Jin gave it his all.

And on the following day, Yu Sae-Jung had to ask for a temporary leave of absence from work.

[The Wizard of Bangbae-Dong has uploaded the new magic he has developed, 'Breath', to his blog. Possessing the unprecedented attack power that can kill a Wyvern in two hits, the world of magic has experienced yet another great shock to the system. The world's top ranked Wizard Tower, 'La Grande' of the USA, questioned whether this spell was actually a hybrid of other existing spells or not...]

As usual, as soon as Sae-Jin uploaded the drone footage to his blog, all hell broke loose. And just as he expected, they initially questioned him for being a fraud or for combining preexisting spells and claimed it as his own. However, the opinions of experts and the data captured from within the Monster field proved that this spell was indeed the real deal.

[The high ranked Wizard from the Seoul Wizard Tower, the Elf

'Remeline'.]

– When you take a look at his staff, you can see Mana being amplified by an incredible amount on that ruby the moment the spell activates. This amplification is great enough to allow a low level Wizard to display fearsome might equal to upper mid level Wizards. That's why, I posit that the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong was borrowing the power of this staff....

The next avenue of attack was, again as predicted, the staff. How could they be so predictably on the mark all the time? Sae-Jin chuckled out a bitter laughter as he continued to watch the news broadcast on the TV.

– Despite all the controversy, today's most actively working Wizard, the 'Wizard of Bangbae-Dong' has entered the top 1000 of worldwide rankings and is continuing on with his unstoppable march forward. The grimoires he corrected and released for sale have now become true treasures that many Wizard Towers around the world can't even get their hands on due to their scarcity. And the soon-to-be-published [Bangbae-Dong Grimoire number 24] has caused a great deal of excitement and anticipation as the rumours and guesses on what it might contain boils over around the world.

However, even after being the target of all this petty jealousy, the fame and the influence of the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong's name was still spreading further everyday.

"I really didn't expect the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong to be our Guild Master..."

Joo Ji-Hyuk muttered audibly, his voice full of admiration and awe.

The place was the top secret conference room built in the underground of The Monster Guild HQ without anyone's knowledge.

Inside this conference room decorated with many top ranked

artifacts, equipment, potions as well as entertainment facilities, there were seven people present at the moment.

Unlike the seriousness of the overall atmosphere, these people were sitting freely on couches while busy watching the TV: Sae-Jin, Yu Baek-Song, Joo Ji-Hyuk, Hazeline, Yi Hye-Rin, Kim Sun-Ho, and the Soo-in, Rejen.

"So, uh, that Bangbae-Dong dude is really you?" (Yu Baek-Song)

Yu Baek-Song asked after Joo Ji-Hyuk's utterances ended. Sae-Jin wordlessly nodded his head.

"Hmph. I heard that one of those grimoires written by Bangbae-Dong guy can cause stock prices of Wizard Towers to go up and down... What a shock..." (Yu Baek-Song)

The stock price of a Wizard Tower named "Pareum" Tower rose up from \$19 per share to over \$30 in less than a week, after it emerged that this Tower had successfully acquired Bangbae-Dong grimoires numbers 18 to 23. Actually, Sae-Jin helped out with that, since this Tower was unusually humble in their attitude.

"Mm? The head of the SID didn't know?" (Sae-Jin)

"The information protected by our intelligence agents won't leak out that easily, boss." (Kim Sun-Ho)

Kim Sun-Ho replied instead. There were thick traces of pride in his speech.

"Seriously... You're too much. Waaay too much... Just why did I study magic for twenty years... All I needed was a nice Trait..." (Hazeline)

These powerless words were uttered out by Hazeline, whose soul had left her around twenty minutes ago when Sae-Jin confessed to her that he was 'the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong'.

A crystal placed next to the TV screen suddenly lit up in red colour. When Joo Ji-Hyuk hurriedly turned the TV off, Lillia's

voice leaked out from the crystal.

- "Everyone, I'd like to convey my gratitude for your decisions to participate in this very dangerous operation. However, the leader of the Bathorys is a woman possessing the most destructive power. Please, take this last opportunity where you can quit, to think your choices over."

Since Sae-Jin and Hazeline had explained the plan in detail to the rest of the group using hand gestures and even pantomime, all Lillia had to do was to reaffirm their resolve and determination.

"...I know all about that Bathory woman's power after hearing so much about it. That's why, I agree with the opinion on getting rid of her before the situation gets worse than now." (Yu Baek-Song)

Yu Baek-Song said out aloud as she stroked the back of Kaiser the 2nd. Too bad, Kaiser only wanted to be on Sae-Jin's lap, though.

- "Of course."

"But, you know what? I also find your stories hard to believe." (Yu Baek-Song)

- "…"

Yu Baek-Song's eyes narrowed like a predator.

"Vampires are a untrustworthy bunch to begin with, so at minimum, shouldn't you reveal yourselves to show how sincere you are?" (Yu Baek-Song)

Her ears stood up straight and stiff. And Sae-Jin promptly reached out pinched both of them tightly.

"Ouch! H, hey!! What are you doing?!"

While looking at the small white tiger jumping up in pure shock after the unexpected touching, Sae-Jin clicked his tongue and spoke.

"I'll guarantee their credibility. Besides, now that the Lord of Vampires has awakened, how do you expect them to come out in the open?" (TL: Just for the record, it has been mentioned in passing that the Vampire Lord possesses an ability that can control all Vampires. That includes Nosferatus as well.)

"...I, I can still inquire about this matter, no? Still, why did you go and pinch my ears!!" (Yu Baek-Song)

Yu Baek-Song rubbed her small ears and pouted. At that adorable appearance, everyone in the room broke out in laughter.

"In any case, have you all come to a decision? To participate in this dangerous mission, where you might lose your lives?" (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin asked with a hardened face.

And they answered energetically in their own preferred way.

"Alright. Then, please, head over to the tattooing area. One tattoo per month – let's get stronger by tattooing ourselves until there's no room left!" (Sae-Jung)

The time remaining was five months. Sae-Jin decided to give each person participating in this mission one Mana Tattoo per month.

*

"Doesn't... doesn't it hurt?" (Yu Baek-Song)

"It doesn't hurt during the process, so be still, please." (Sae-Jin)

"During? Then, what happens afterwards?" (Yu Baek-Song)

Everyone else got their Tattoos no problem, but strangely Yu Baek-Song kept on evading Sae-Jin's hands.

"Un, unhand me at once!!! Growl!! Grrrooooowwwl!!!" (Yu Baek-Song)

"Just be still!! I'll buy you something really tasty when we are all finished here!!" (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin finally succeeded in catching her by using tasty treats as

bait. It seemed that, with her lips resolutely closed shut, she was getting ready to receive her Tattoo.

But, just as the needle tip gleamed under the light, she jumped up into the air like a scalded cat, and shouted out in a really loud voice.

"NOPE!! Now that I think about it, I don't need it since I'm already super strong!!!" (Yu Baek-Song)

" "

Sae-Jin shook his head, and then... spread out a white-coloured potion in front of her face.

"Eeek!! what are you doi..."

She tried to spit out the liquid that entered her mouth and shouted angrily, but less than three seconds later, she figuratively melted into a puddle.

That was a potion with the effect of inducing a deep sleep. Of course, since she was Yu Baek-Song, she would regain her consciousness in less than five minutes, but that was more than enough time.

"Whew..."

Sae-Jin sighed out and resumed the tattooing operation.

Shudder, shudder...

As the tattooing needle came in contact with her, Yu Baek-Song's small body trembled intermittently.

< 40. The Wintering (1) > Fin.

Chapter 136: The Wintering (2)

Inside the underground conference room beneath The Monster HQ, the members of the raid party were steadily strengthening their bodies. Knights trained tirelessly to get used to various Mana Tattoo enhancements, while Hazeline was getting to know more and more about the artificial heart and how it operated.

"Wow, so you can enter a complete 'Divine Beast' mode?" (Joo Ji-Hyuk)

"Hm, hmm. That's right. It's only for a short while, but when I'm in the full Great White Tiger form, I fear no one. It's not for nothing a Soo-in with a Divine Beast bloodline like me gets all the attention in the world. I mean, in the past, nations were fighting over each other to take me home first, you know?" (Yu Baek-Song)

Currently, the time was during a small break between the all-out training sessions.

When Joo Ji-Hyuk started praising Yu Baek-Song, she crossed her arms and the hot air, filled with excessive pride, bellowed out from her flaring nostrils.

Seeing her show off like this, Sae-Jin felt the need to bully her for a bit, so he stealthily sneaked near her gently-swaying tail and then, tightly grabbed it.

"Euh-haht!!"

Yu Baek-Song jumped up high into the air then began kicking towards her back. Unfortunately, her short legs weren't going to reach Sae-Jin's arm...

"Un, unhand me!!!"

She screamed out in unbridled rage, yet every time Sae-Jin brushed her tail, her hostility weakened bit by bit. Having her tail stroked by a person with a nice scent – that sensation made her unhappy but at the same time made her feel good as well.

"Let, let go..... Euha~."

In the end, she went down for good like a fish flapping helplessly outside the water. While carrying an insidious smile, he took her tail that was needlessly longer than her body, and chomped down on it. And well, that roused yet another powerful reaction out of her.

"...No matter how I see it, doesn't it look like Miss Yu Baek-Song enjoys being tormented a bit too much?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

Just as Yu Baek-Song was about to escape from the grasp of an evil entity known as Kim Sae-Jin, Yi Hye-Rin teasingly spoke up.

"What nonsense are you talking about?" (Yu Baek-Song)

"No, well, it's nothing... By the way, Miss Baek-Song. Do you know, by any chance, what is an 'S' and an 'M'?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

"...What the heck are those?" (Yu Baek-Song)

"It's just alphabets... Oh, would you like to choose? Which one do you like more, an S or an M?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

After sensing a somewhat suspicious air coming off of Yi Hye-Rin, Yu Baek-Song's brows furrowed deeply. However, Yi Hye-Rin simply smiled thickly and egged her on to make a choice.

"Please hurry." (Yi Hye-Rin)

The interested gazes of the guild members gathered on her. Yu Baek-Song deeply wondered about this, thinking whether she needed to do this for real, before finally opening her lips in a cautious manner.

".....An M?"

At the same time, lots of laughter broke out. Yu Baek-Song tilted her head with a face full of questions. Sae-Jin held back his laughter and stood next to her and then, proceeded to lightly tap on her small head as he spoke in a serious voice.

"Everyone, please stop. Do you find it fun to tease a little kid?"

(Sae-Jin)

"...Who are you calling a little kid? You, stop before I bite you to death." (Yu Baek-Song)

"...Cough."

And so, as they were busy chatting and laughing among themselves, the door to their right that led into the 'isolation barrier' chamber opened up.

SFX for slow, meandering footsteps

A deeply-haggard looking Hazeline weakly walked out while her gaze was fixed to the floor.

"Miss Hazeline, are you okay?" (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin pushed a prepared mug of coffee that also contained a potion with an effect of recovering energy to her.

"....Imightgetbetterifyouhugmejustonce."

While receiving the mug, she took a glance around her and then, like a machine gun, quickly whispered to him.

"Ah, oh. Uh, that is..."

Too bad, since Sae-Jin knew her real feelings, he couldn't just brush this aside as a simple joke. Seeing him like this, Hazeline smiled and spoke first.

"I'm just joking. It's a joke."

Hazeline sipped on the mug while walking over to the couch where everyone else was sitting down. Regular Dark Elves didn't like to hang around other people, but still, she had a good rapport with the members of this team. It was par for the course, really – since everyone gathered here were all good natured and thoughtful people.

"Oh, right. What is Knight Kim Yu-Rin doing right now? Hasn't it been already two months?" (Joo Ji-Hyuk)

Joo Ji-Hyuk spoke up. Momentarily, Hazeline's hands holding the coffee mug spasmed slightly.

"She's resting well in some hut on the East Coast. I think, all of the fatigue built up over her entire career just flooded out the gates because of that event not too long ago. You see, my team captain, ever since entering the Knights Order at the age of 17, she has never gone on a holiday until now..." (Yi Hye-Rin)

"...Hmm."

With a complicated expression, Sae-Jin brought his mug of coffee close to his face. That word, 'hut', got on his conscious just a tad.

"Did you go and visit her?" (Joo Ji-Hyuk)

"Of course. I was so shocked when I got there, you know? Was this her going through menopause? Or was the fact that she never got to own a pet until now finally getting to her? Or... was she depressed because the Hero Orc rejected her...?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

Shudder.

Sae-Jin's body shuddered imperceptibly. That last bit really poked his conscience good.

"But she was like... she just smiled this lonely smile, and said nothing back. Didn't deny, didn't even acknowledge it... No, you know what she did? She said that she just wanted to rest for awhile, then prepared a meal for us to eat together." (Yi Hye-Rin)

Sae-Jin felt a slight case of guilty conscience washing over him.

"...It can't be... lovesickness, right?" (Sae-Jin)

"Oh, well. Let's talk about that some other time. Guild Master, just when are you going to tell us about your Trait?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

Yi Hye-Rin quickly changed the subject, then.

"Uh? Oh, my Trait..."

Sae-Jin hadn't told them, other than Kim Sun-Ho and Hazeline,

what his 'Trait' was.

But, when the time came, he was thinking of revealing his Leviathan Form and nothing else. Just as well, he couldn't reveal them in the first place, anyways. His Wolf Form was the 'Lycan', and the Hero Orc Form was tangled up in Kim Yu-Rin's mess, so...

"Maybe two months? I'll let you know then." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin replied so and smiled brightly.

"What~? Oh, come on now~~. We already told you ours, though~~." (Yi Hye-Rin)

Sae-Jin ignored Yi Hye-Rin's fake jeering and entered the isolation barrier chamber where Hazeline had been inside just now.

"...Wow."

As expected – thanks most likely to Hazeline's magic training, not one spot of the chamber was left undamaged. Abrasions, deep gouges, things overturned, things crushed to bits, etc, etc...

"Hmm, hmm."

For now, he sat down in the middle of a crater on the floor.

And then, while revealing the claws of the Wolf on one hand, he brought up the Status Window for one of his Skills.

[Chain Claws]

[Skill Proficiency Level: B+]

Then, to add to this, he summoned lightning magic on the other hand.

Crackle, sparkle

Blindingly white bolts of electricity buzzed around his hand. Sure enough, the Status Windows got activated by using this midranked spell.

[Lightning Bolt]

[Skill Proficiency Level: A]

The Status Windows were indeed very convenient existences. Even magic spells that were not Skills were recorded and helped him utilise them in various other ways.

Such as, when combining different Skills, or when he was about to inscribe a Magic Tattoo...

And now, he was going to use 'Skill combination'.

He had used this Skill a few times in the past, but the increases in the cooling down period between each use versus the grade of the resulting Skill proved to be poor so he stopped using it altogether.

Using this Skill was very easy. All he had to was think about combining them, and bring the Skills together.

So, when he combined the boiling hot arcs of electricity with the gleaming claws, then...

SFX for very unpleasant screeches

First, a horrifying screeching cry of electricity akin to nails on the blackboard, and then, Phurhung!! A huge explosion occurred next.

[Skill combination has been successful.]

[New combined Skill: Lightning Chain Claw]

- The host can fire a chain of lightning in the shape of claws, or the lightning itself can be imbued on the claws themselves. Depending on the Proficiency Level of the Skill, the host can utilise the electrons in the air to infinitely spam the lightning, or by combining together with the target's blood, cause electrocution of the target.
- According to the resulting grade (Mid), the cool down time for the Skill is: [99 Days, 23 Hours, 00 Minutes, 59 Seconds.]

[&]quot;Oww, yeah."

He was only trying to come up with something new, so he could record it on the 24th grimoire, but this was simply beyond his expectations.

"Oh well... I can just lower the power a bit and then publish the book."

He didn't think too much about it and pulled out an empty grimoire.

He grabbed a pen and began drawing the anatomy of a person, the most efficient path for the Mana's circulation, as well as some tips on using this magic the best. Thanks to the Skill, Goblins' Craftsmanship, he could even draw right down to the most minute detail.

To be clear, this wasn't what the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong had been doing until now. This was him creating a new spell.

The spell [Lightning] may have formed the base, but the new spell displayed a might that far outstripped the original magic.

"Huh-huh."

But, as he was writing this, an unknown smile kept creeping up on his lips. A desire to defeat others even began boiling up.

Always trying to bring him down by saying he plagiarised, that he only knew how to correct, etc, etc... What would those conceited Wizard Towers say after seeing this spell? Most likely, they won't even get to enjoy the moral victory this time.

'Wizards speak not with words, but with actions, indeed.'

Time was like the endlessly flowing river; it didn't stop even for one moment.

The boiling hot rays of the sun had cooled down before anyone noticed the change and the Autumn visited in full force, dying the falling leaves brown.

And on the day the falling petals of flowers dancing in the cooling winds were broadcast on the television screens.

The grimoire number 24 of the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong series, [Linked Lightning Claws] got published.

Unlike in the past when he simply corrected, supplemented and/or enhanced existing spells, this grimoire featured a completely new spell. A new footage of the magic in action was uploaded to the blog; the composition of the grimoire was so perfect, not one fault could be found.

Wizard Towers had to experience yet another round of massive shock to the system.

This time, though, their level of shock was on another world altogether. Unlike fixing an existing spell, creating a new one outright was something even highly ranked Wizards found very difficult to do.

Many Wizard Towers threw their all in finding errors in this grimoire but... The Pareum Tower had received the book before everyone else, and its Tower Lord got to study the book for a whole week, before he replicated the spell in full, albeit a lot weaker, glory. Which meant others had to accept the reality of the situation.

Now normally, new spells came to light maybe 5~6 times a year in Korea. It depended on countries, but the numbers didn't exceed two digits regardless of the territory. Taking the number of Wizards active in Korea – around fifty thousand – it wasn't wrong to say that the creation of a new magic spell was the most prestigious achievement all Wizards dreamed of accomplishing one day.

However, someone who didn't even work for a Wizard Tower, someone who hadn't even graduated from a Wizard Academy, someone with an unprofessional name like the 'Wizard of Bangbae-Dong' had done something this incredibly difficult...

Many Wizards belonging to Wizard Towers could only despair at the unbridgeable chasm existing between them and the mysterious Wizard.

- The magic spell created by the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong, the [Linked Lightning Claws], has been inspected by the Pareum Wizard Tower who received the grimoire first... And without an issue, the spell has been accepted as a legitimate new creation. To correct 23 grimoires in just over a year, and also, to create a brand new spell, too... It can only be described as a truly frightening talent.

The Tower Lord of the Seoul Wizard Tower, that held quite a pronounced hostile relationship with the Bangbae-Dong Wizard, the Elf Romaine, personally held a press conference. As an aside, the Seoul Tower placed high importance on its member's alma mater, as well as his or her bloodline.

This announcement sounded like that of a surrender to Kim Sae-Jin's ears.

And soon after this declaration of surrender, the blog of Bangbae-Dong Wizard became full with words of congratulations from high level leaders from various world-famous Wizard Towers, as well as earnest requests to purchase the new grimoire.

Unfortunately, he couldn't get to savour the sense of victory for too long.

Because... the day of the fated battle was approaching rapidly.

"Hey, hey, could that be?"

The place currently was the East Sea.

For the first time after a long while, Kim Sae-Jin came out to this part of the sea in the Leviathan Form.

"Is that... the Azure Dragon?"

The reporters had come here after getting the heads up from Sae-

Jin, but now, they were deeply puzzled by the sudden change to the colour of the scales of the 'Azure Dragon'.

This was all part of the plan – to show off the transformed look of the Azure Dragon, and to fan the flames of Bathory's curiosity and her small-ish (?) desire to possess him.

"Something seems to have changed?"

The gathered reporters muttered in confusion. But soon enough, just like the professionals that they were, they focused on the reason why they were there in the first place, and Sae-Jin too began his part by showing off.

He smiled as brightly – as adorably – as possible towards schools of fish that came to swim around him; he raised a bit of a wave to surf on it; he even pulled a dignified face and stared at the sun.

Cameras didn't miss a single valuable shot and captured them all.

"Appearing after a lengthy hiatus, the appearance of the Guardian of the East has changed significantly. The hues of its scales has changed from the clear blue to a delicate, but noble silver hue. We do not know whether it's because the Azure Dragon has grown even further, or if it shed its scales like other animals molting, but it certainly instils much trust in the Azure Dragon as we watch it interact with the rest of the ocean's residents."

After about a hour of this, Sae-Jin could hear the 'closing' comment from one of the reporters. He felt the rush of fatigue from acting overtaking him.

"We're done here."

The reporters wiped the sweat off and ended their work for now, but the cameramen continued to film the Azure Dragon.

Because of this... Sae-Jin had to act for a little bit longer.

< 40. The Wintering (2) > Fin.

Chapter 137: The Wintering (3)

The appearance of the Azure Dragon as seen in the video footage was, for a lack of better description, endearing. Smiles automatically found their ways to people's faces, when they saw the Dragon caring for the marine lifeforms that had build their homes in the East Sea; the sense of admiration and trust in the creature could only soar higher when seeing it survey the distant horizon, in case an unwelcome Monster pops out.

And its scales changing its hue to faint silver – although making it a bit tricky to call it Azure now – caused a storm of curiosity and desire to learn the reason from the public as well.

".....Ahhh."

Currently, inside the penthouse suite of a certain luxury hotel.

The most likely candidate to inherit the position of power from the current Vampire Lord, "queen" Prillani Bathory was dazedly staring at the image of the Azure Dragon being projected on to a wall.

As she looked on at the 'new' Azure Dragon, the powerful emotion she had to suppress for a long time because of her inept and dumb subordinates' dissuasions reared its ugly head once more.

That emotion was, of course, the desire to possess; the burning curiosity and her throbbing heart, almost a fetish-like avarice.

SFX for a cheerful growl.

She saw the Dragon smile brightly as it surveyed the lifeforms – fish – it protected. She wanted so badly to corrupt that smile whenever she saw it. To make it more savage, more cruel, more violent. To make it only submit to her, and to see it bare its fangs at anyone else that wasn't her...

As Bathory began stomping on the ground while completely unaware of doing it herself, an Elder Apostle called out to her in worry.

"What?" (Bathory)

It was just a single word, but her tone of voice possessed enough killing intent within it to send chills down the Apostle's backside. He couldn't dare to meet her eye to eye, and kept his gaze fixed to the floor.

"Just like before... there are just too many eyewitnesses in the East Sea, my Lady." (Apostle)

The Elder Apostles, the only ones possessing enough status to seek an audience with their future queen, tried their utmost to stop her. Although the Bathory girl was someone with a stubborn personality that just had to do what she wanted in order to please herself, by using the excuse of their grand scheme of 'returning to the homeland', they could tie her up in the meantime.

"I also know, okay? I mean, why should I pay attention to that thing, when I had a long and nice chat with the Lord..."

SFX for a cute-ish yawn of a Dragon

As soon as those words left her lips.

A unique scene of the Azure Dragon yawning and stretching its arms came on the screen. Bathory looked at that in a total daze and took a big gulp of her overflowing saliva.

"...W, why would I pay attention to something like that?" (Bathory)

Unlike her words, though, her eyes were firmly glued to the wall where the images were being projected to.

"That is a relief..." (Apostle)

"If my Lady desires to possess the creature, then, isn't it possible to capture it during Winter?"

However.

Suddenly, a certain unnamed Apostle stepped forward. He was a young Apostle whose combat powers had seen an abrupt increase lately and had quickly climbed up into the position within the Bathory's royal guards.

"Y, you b*stard, what are y..."

"Mm? What do you mean by that?" (Bathory)

The aged Elder Apostle, almost succeeding in pacifying her, panicked and whispered to the new guy, but those words uttered by him was more than enough to rouse her interest thoroughly.

"My Lady!! You mustn't!! Right now, we..."

"You, shut your mouth, and you, I'm all ears." (Bathory)

Bathory slowly stroked her lips with her slender fingers while staring at the young Apostle.

"I'm sure my Lady's great insight must have informed you already, but if I was allowed to say it... Firstly, it is cold and barren during the winter months. That is why, Monsters become even more violent during this period. Humans don't like the cold, so they try not to go out, meaning, who would think of heading over to the East Sea? In other words, there will be far less number of eyes by then."

The young Apostle's name was 'Rhosrahdel'. Caught by Sae-Jin in the past and becoming his slave with the power of 'the Dark Energy Link', this Vampire was reciting the information given to him secretly by Sae-Jin in full. (TL: This guy made his first appearance in chapters 89 and 90.)

"And also, I'm of an opinion that the Lady Bathory's plans would greatly benefit our overall scheme as well. Maybe other Apostles don't think the same, but isn't it rather blindingly obvious that brainwashing a powerful divine creature like that Dragon would bolster our forces even more greatly? That is why, I believe that we

shouldn't mind small losses if it means we will be gaining greatly in the end." (Rhosrahdel)

"You young one who doesn't know anything... My Lady, please do not listen to him. It may be true to some extent that the number of witnesses might decrease, but there is still no guarantee that brainwashing will be successful..."

"If it's you, my Lady, I have no doubts whatsoever." (Rhosrahdel)

Rhosrahdel did his best to butter up to her, but suspicions grew larger on Bathory's face as her eyes remained on him.

During her lifetime, she had met her share of treacherous subordinates. That is why, even she could easily figure out that unending and baseless praising were the hallmarks of those slimy b*stards.

Facing this eerie silence, Rhosrahdel's face hardened slightly, but before the suspicion against him could grow larger, he projected the screen of his phone in the air.

"To be more helpful to you my Lady, I have been slowly advancing my membership grade in the Azure Dragon website until now. I participated in their meetings, and even donated a great deal of money as well. And as a result, I am now able to find out the Dragon's radius and scope of movement." (Rhosrahdel)

It was true that, with his clearance, Rhosrahdel could access 'VVIP' level of information from the Azure Dragon website. As an aside, the membership advancement was so strict that not even Bathory, who had secretly joined, could advance past the 'Gold' membership even now.

"...Mmm..."

Then, Bathory's expression softened a little. Immediately sensing the change, Rhosrahdel quickly informed her of the latest development.

"The Azure Dragon during its growth phase requires a lot of

sleep, so the most likely time it will be seen again is around the evening of 25th of December... or so they say. This can not be any more ideal, my Lady. Not only is it in the middle of Winter, it's also Christmas, so people will choose to spend the day with their families, meaning there should be no one out there by the ocean."

Rhosrahdel stopped with his words right there.

However, he certainly dared not to look up for he lacked the necessary balls to do so. What kind of facial expressions would she be making right now? Could she be getting ready to drain every drop of blood out from his body at this very moment?

"Hey you, get lost." (Bathory)

Rhosradel's heart fell to the bottom. He needed to quickly disappear from her sight, yet his body shook so much, he couldn't move.

He wondered whether this was how he was going to die, but fortunately for him, her voice wasn't directed towards his direction.

"Lady Bathory!! We have a far bigger plan to execute, rather than that Azure Dragon...!!"

That was a desperate cry of the elderly Elder Apostle.

"Who do you think you are to raise your voice!!" (Bathory)

In shock, Rhosrahdel quickly lifted his head. He saw the aged Elder deeply kowtowing and apologising his heart out.

"...Please forgive this foolish old man."

"I know you are not some treacherous b*stard, okay? However, I think this guy over here will be more useful for this job, don't you think? Hey, kid." (Bathory)

"Y, yes?"

Bathory looked over Rhosrahdel once and licked her lips slowly.

"Stay here from now on." (Bathory)

"That, that means..." (Rhosrahdel)

"You're moving up in the world. Congrats. Of course, who knows for how long you can hold on, though." (Bathory)

She smirked lazily and extended her foot. It was a pale but refined foot. There were faint lines of blood vessels visible on her skin like some kind of pedicure treatment gone wrong.

This was the sign of submission and loyalty that Bathory liked to perform. Rhosrahdel very cautiously began licking her toes.

November, when the Winter was getting steadily closer. There was a strange and tense atmosphere circulating among the members present within the secret underground conference room.

- "The day of the operation is 25th of December - the Christmas day."

Lillia's voice came out from the communication crystal placed on top of a table.

"That's good. People won't come out to the sea during Christmas.... It's fine if it's only us who has to suffer. It's a day that comes around only once in a year, after all."

Yi Hye-Rin jokingly complained.

"But still, I can't hardly believe it even now... Guild Master, your Trait is really you transforming into the Azure Dragon, I mean, into the Leviathan?!" (Yi Hye-Rin)

Sae-Jin nodded his head wordlessly. Yi Hye-Rin and Joo Ji-Hyuk stared at him dazedly for a while, before cautiously asked him.

"Uhm, maybe..."

"Is it possible to show us?"

"No can do." (Sae-Jin)

Of course, he could do it. But he sure as hell didn't feel like it. After all, they would treat him like a plush toy if he did change.

Joo Ji-Hyuk chomped down hard on the biscuit as if he was upset, while Yi Hye-Rin frowned deeply as she dug in deeper into the backrest of the couch.

Ttiring-

A text message arrived on Yi Hye-Rin's phone at that time. She slowly pulled her phone out and checked the message, before letting out a long sigh.

"Excuse me. I am not supposed to tell Yu Sae-Jung what we are doing no matter what, yes?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

"...Was that from Sae-Jung just now?" (Sae-Jin)

"Yes. She's asking me if I'm with you right now." (Yi Hye-Rin)

"Tell her that you are not sure, that I must still be at work," said Sae-Jin as he began putting on his jacket to leave.

Yi Hye-Rin's mouth went O-shaped and her expression showed her confusion.

"...You're leaving? You're rather unexpectedly well domesticated, aren't you?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

"...What do you mean by unexpected?" (Sae-Jin)

"No, well... This situation, no matter who sees it, it's kinda lewd, you know?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

Yi Hye-Rin pointed at his thighs. On top of his hardened and muscular thighs that wouldn't lose to slabs of granite, Yu Baek-Song was comfortably taking a nap with the softest snoring anyone could imagine. On top of this, up until a few seconds ago, Sae-Jin was busy brushing her ears and hair with his right hand, while the left was busy stroking her tail...

"....What can I do, when she's so adorable like this? Besides, she came up all on her own, you know? I didn't coax her or anything."

(Sae-Jin)

...Well, he did lead her a little bit, though.

He lightly flicked Yu Baek-Song's ear while making his weak-sauce excuse. As the ear was sensitive to touch, it straightened up immediately, before falling back down in a cute manner. And when he lightly grasped her tail...

SFX for a cute growl of a cat

...She let off a cute cat-like groan.

"Yes, she is really cute, though..." (Yi Hye-Rin)

"Besides, if we count her age in human terms, she's only 15, 16, right? It's like having a younger sister." (Sae-Jin)

"Well, I guess you're right... But can I also touch her?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

Yi Hye-Rin sneakily reached out with her hand, but Sae-Jin was cold as he slapped her hand away.

Slap!

"The white fur might get dirty." (Sae-Jin)

"...What?! Isn't this the tyranny of the Guild Master, saying my hands are dirty?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

"Nope. She might wake up if it's not a familiar set of hands." (Sae-Jin)

"Mmm..."

Right on cue, Yu Baek-Song rubbed her face all over his thighs and began to fret in her sleep. Sae-Jin busily moved his hands and gently brushed her nose, ears, and tail as well as other parts safe to pat, which helped her fall deeper back into her sleep.

"You almost woke her up." (Sae-Jin)

"....Seriously, you really know how to look after a child. I'm sure Sae-Jung is very happy." (Yi Hye-Rin)

Sae-Jin smiled in satisfaction and looked down at Yu Baek-Song. Unfortunately, all his efforts in trying not to wake her up were all in vain.

"AAAAHK!!!!"

A loud scream pierced through the isolation barrier and entered the room. Waking up immediately from her sleep, Yu Baek-Song jumped right out of his thighs and high up in the air, while the members present in the room hurriedly ran towards the door and yanked it open.

"Miss Hazeline!! Are you alri..."

"I did it!! I did it!!" (Hazeline)

However, it wasn't a scream, but a shout of excitement. Everyone looked at her with their mouths wide open, while Hazeline hopped and bounced around as she shouted out again and again.

"Did my voice leak out just now?" (Hazeline)

"Yes... Oh, did you succeed in controlling the artificial heart?"

"Yes!! I wielded it perfectly just now!!" (Hazeline)

Hazeline kept on shouting out in joy while she took large strides forward. She then brushed past Joo Ji-Hyuk, went past Yu Baek-Song and Yi Hye-Rin, and proceeded to embrace to Kim Sae-Jin who was right at the back.

"Perfect!! A perfection!! I definitely know what to do now!!" (Hazeline)

"....Uhm, Miss Hazeline?" (Sae-Jin)

"...Well, really, doesn't this seem like such an undeniably immoral thing no matter who sees it~~~?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

Yi Hye-Rin shot him a pointed stare full of questions. Sae-Jin cautiously pushed Hazeline back and to her credit, she too took three steps back in embarrassment.

"Keum. Ah, I'm so sorry. I was just too excited just now..." (Hazeline)

But it was a bit too late by then; there was a somewhat complicated silence descending on the conference room.

"Hey, gimme something to eat."

....That was, excluding Yu Baek-Song who was busy tugging at Sae-Jin's sleeve.

And the time was now 30th of November.

While standing by the edge of the East Sea, Sae-Jin took a long look at the Leviathan's scale in his hand. As long as he eats this, the growth percentage of his Leviathan Form would increase greatly, and his overall might would also explode higher, far beyond comparison.

However, his worries were just as big. He was worried about his 'ego' being swept away this time around with the sudden increase of power in this Monster Form.

Lillia said there was nothing to worry about. She was definitely sure of it. It was anyone's guess where her confidence came from, but for now, he had no choice but to believe her, and eat this thing. Well, he needed lots of time to get used to the newly-strengthened Leviathan Form, after all.

"Fuu..."

He breathed in deeply to chase away his fears.

Sae-Jin transformed into the Leviathan Form and swallowed the scale right away.

"Kkeu-euhk....."

As countless alert windows popped up in his view, Sae-Jin was assaulted by the unbearable pain that felt like all of his bones were contracting and then stretching relentlessly.

[You have ingested an adult Leviathan's scale!]

[The growth rate will rapidly rise up to 25%! The bottleneck, '1st level growth limit' has been reached!]

[With the aid of the adult Leviathan's scale, this bottleneck has been overcome! The growth rate has increased past 25% and has reached 33%! A pair of small wings will grow on the back of the Leviathan!]

[Skills 'Leviathan's comprehension' and 'Mana Body' will increase in level by one!]

[The Skill, 'God of the Sea' has been unlocked!]

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• • •

< 40. The Wintering (3) > Fin.

Chapter 138: The Wintering (4)

It felt like his entire body was forcibly being stretched. This was a kind of pain where he was sure of something yanking on his head and limbs from all directions. Did the torturous pain from the dismemberment execution of the medieval times feel this bad, the one where the head and limbs were tied to ends of horses and then pulled apart? It also felt like his throat had clammed up and as a result, he couldn't even voice out his suffering. He could only shut his eyes tightly and endure.

In the meantime, a wondrous change took place with the Leviathan's body.

In human terms, this was a moment when a child transformed into a teenager.

His tail extended out even more gracefully than before; the body's length increased and became bulkier, and a horn on his forehead shone with beautiful radiance that easily exceeded most famous jewelry ever know to men.

There was still some cherubic hints left within the facial features, but now it was far more sculpted and perfect with not one glaring flaw visible to the naked eye. It was the type of a countenance that sort of resembled an ocean-bound lifeform, a reptilian, and a mammal – like, a shark, a lizard and a wolf – combined together.

It indeed resembled a dragon from all those legendary mythical tales of the past.

""

However, the Leviathan in question was unable to sense this earth-shaking change taking place – he could only float helplessly on the surface of the ocean, completely lost within the sea of pain wrecking his entire body.

The sight of a 7-metre-long dragon-like Monster floating like a

corpse was indeed a marvelously strange thing, enough to cause any enterprising Hunters passing by to think they must've won the lottery or something.

But thankfully, there was no other soul to be found under the darkened navy-blue sky. And thus, the Leviathan was afforded enough to time to overcome the growing pains.

Time passed by and eventually, the dawn's faint lights shimmered off the ocean's surface. Sae-Jin finally opened his eyes after 6 straight hours of pain-induced unconsciousness.

"Buah... Puh-euh-euh..."

He didn't die, and had survived the ordeal. He no longer felt any pain either. He breathed out a long sigh of relief. Too bad, that sigh became a horrifying tsunami that seemed to overturn the heavens, and began rushing towards the East Sea's coastline.

"Ah."

For a wave created by a simple sigh, it being over 20 metres tall seemed horrifyingly unbalanced. Sae-Jin the Leviathan's face crumpled in unsightly manner as he wondered how he should stop this calamity from hitting the shore.

It was then.

He only thought about it, yet the vigorous tsunami wave began sprouting many little water bubbles, before dissolving into a cute little puddle and it soon disappeared completely from the view.

"…?"

But, uh, I didn't do anything, though?

Kim Sae-Jin tilted his head this way and that, but the alert windows cleared up his confusion.

[The Proficiency Level for the Skill 'God of the Sea' has increased!]

[God of the Sea]

[Proficiency Level: 35%]

- The host can control the ocean with his 'will' only. Mana will be consumed, of course, but would there be a limit to Mana's supply for a Leviathan when he's in the ocean?

'...Ohhhh.'

Sae-Jin stayed in the water and played around for a while longer. Whenever he moved his body, he could rouse up tsunami waves, destructive storm winds and other natural ocean-bound calamities.

After fooling around unchecked for a bit like that, Sae-Jin quietly transformed back into the human form and stepped back on the dry land. At the same time, his mobile phone rang a short alarm.

[Emergency broadcast!! An earthquake-tsunami detected on the East Sea, time 04:53 AM.]

"...Looks like I should act in moderation."

He smirked slightly and headed back towards his home.

Afterwards, Sae-Jin devoted most of his time in getting familiar with the newly-developed powers of the Leviathan. Meanwhile, the members of the raid team continued to grow every day by training and sharpening their abilities.

That's how the days continued to rapidly flow by – one day, two days, three, four...

"Dispatching the Kraken again?" (Sae-Jin)

"Yes, sir. This time, it's in England." (Jo Hahn-Sung)

15 days before the fated day of the operation, when everyone was feeling tense.

Jo Hahn-Sung personally came to see Sae-Jin in his office. It was because the British Foreign Office had made the urgent request to dispatch the Kraken.

"Okay, so what's going on over there now?" (Sae-Jin)

"Apparently, a Boss-level snake Monster called 'Mangsasa' has built a nest within the Pennines mountain range, sir. Since the geographical location isn't ideal for battle, the British are in a bind as they also can't leave it alone, but it seems that they thought of the Italian incident from a while back." (Jo Hahn-Sung) (TL: Mangsasa is a set of Hanja that the author seemed to have invented by himself. Individual words translates to "Ruinous/Destroyed (Mang) Heinous/Evil (Sa) Snake (Sa). I couldn't really find a snake-type monster with a name similar to this so I thought I'd leave it in romanised form. Hopefully you're fine with that.) ".....Hmm."

If this was any other time period, he would agree to send the Kraken, but he had to give it a serious thought right now. After all, the Kraken would play a big role when fighting the Bathory woman soon.

"How much are they willing to fork out?" (Sae-Jin)

"Just like then, they are putting up the important loot from the raid." (Jo Hahn-Sung) 'Important loot' probably meant the Monster's Mana Stone, as well as parts of its carcass – in a snake's case, its fangs.

"Hmm... What is your opinion on this, Mister Hahn-Sung?" (Sae-Jin) "I don't have anything particular to add, sir. After all, the compensation proposed by them are not for the benefit of the company as a whole, but it lines up more closely to the Guild Master's hobbies." (Jo Hahn-Sung) "......"

Sae-Jin narrowed his eyes and glared at him. From some time ago, the company took centre stage in this guy's eyes...

Quickly deciphering the meaning behind Sae-Jin's unhappy glare, Jo Hahn-Sung hurriedly added more.

"Kehuem. However, if it was up to me, I would agree to do it, sir. A Kraken isn't going to wear out anyways from the repeated use, so

it doesn't make a lot of sense to let an opportunity to make profit slip away. Plus, it seems that they are quite desperate now, seeing how the British Foreign Secretary came to speak to me here in the Guild, sir." (Jo Hahn-Sung) "That happened? Fine. But... how long will it take, according to the Brits?" (Sae-Jin) It was fine to send the Kraken, but since the creature would play a part in the Bathory hunting, at a minimum, he had to recall it before the 25th.

"Since it's only one day's travel from here to Britain, they are suggesting four days, tops."

"Mm... Alright, cool. Agree to a set of dates and let me know."

Finishing his words up to here, Sae-Jin was about to hand over the documents containing his permission to Jo Hahn-Sung.

"Ah, actually... The thing is, sir, they are waiting outside the office right now." (Jo Hahn-Sung) "...Eh?"

"Please come in, everyone!!" (Jo Hahn-Sung)

As soon as Jo Hahn-Sung's shout ended, foreigners wearing clean-cut formal suits poured into Sae-Jin's office. And there were 15 of them. The spacious office became half-full in no time.

"Thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule to meet with us!!"

A man who could be the Foreign Secretary of the United Kingdom shouted out in broken Korean and bent his waist forward 90 degrees. His colleagues echoed his movement and did the same.

Sae-Jin faltered from his seat, quickly got up and asked them to sit down first.

"Ah, uh, yes, well, uh, please, take a seat. I'm not sure what is the meaning of this sudden visit, though."

"Firstly, excuse my rude behaviour and allow me get to the main topic. These are the all the information compiled for the Boss Monster, Mangsasa." From the suitcases they carried, documents after documents were pulled out in sequential order. Since it was 15 people producing documents, the seemingly-wide conference table soon became a grave of papers in no time. Sae-Jin's expression naturally crumpled as well.

"The details of our proposed compensation can be found on this document, here. On top of this, our government guarantees an one-off payment of £10 million for the dispatch itself. This fee is yours, even if the Monster Mangsasa is not defeated..."

The Foreign Secretary rapidly fired his words out. Sae-Jin searched for Jo Hahn-Sung, but he had already evacuated from the office, and that left Sae-Jin to sit there and listen to the briefing related to the Boss Monster for the next 30 minutes or so.

"...And that is all we have. Guild Master Kim Sae-Jin-nim, please lend us your aid."

"Please help us."

"Please help us."

At the end of the briefing, all the officers from the UK Foreign Office lowered their heads with sincere facial expressions. Seeing 15 high ranking group of men from a foreign country doing this sure made Sae-Jin feel quite odd at that moment. Embarrassed yet content, burdened yet feeling boastful, that was how he felt.

"However, I thought there were many outstanding people in the UK? So why...?" (Sae-Jin) "At the moment, within the United Kingdom's borders, we have two Boss level Monsters to deal with – the Mangsasa and the 'Preven'. Our forces are currently focused on combating the Preven which has been active near the city of Oxford. However, if the Mangsasa decides to aim for the gap in our forces and leave its nest during this time, and head South, then..."

The rays of hope shining out from the blue eyes of the Foreign Secretary were quite burdensome to behold.

Sae-Jin massaged his forehead for the next ten minutes, looking as if he was in a serious thinking process, before slowly opening his mouth.

*

The Boss Monster-related Incident Special Squad, based in London.

A massive screen to the front projected the image of the Boss Monster, while on the lengthy desk shaped like an unfolded fan, countless documents were piled on top.

Equally many team members were silently holding their breaths, waiting for the answer from their Foreign Secretary who had flown over to Korea.

- "The negotiation has been completed."

A small commotion erupted as soon as the Secretary's voice came out of the speakers.

"...What are the results?"

The Prime Minister of United Kingdom, 'Reiden', cautiously asked. He was still uneasy about this whole thing. Should he have gone there instead of the Foreign Affairs Secretary? Did the deal collapse because he chose the national pride over its success?

- "Ha-ah..."

A long and drawn out sigh came from the other side of the line. Since it sounded like the sound of defeat, the listeners also let out long sighs as well.

However.

The Foreign Secretary was simply pulling a prank. He shouted out in a very excited voice.

- "We did it!! Sir Kim Sae-Jin agreed to dispatch the Kraken right this minute!!" (TL: LOL what? He's a Sir now?!) Silence invaded the room for a short moment. The listeners hadn't had the chance yet to fully understand the Secretary's words.

"R, really?"

The first to react was Prime Minister Reiden. He adjusted his glasses and asked again.

- "Yes, of course!!"

Right away, cries of cheers exploded out and documents flew up in the air.

It was a scene straight out of a Hollywood movie. However, the Prime Minister understood full well this wasn't some cliched scene from a disaster movie, that this was really happening.

– Kim Sae-Jin's Kraken showed off yet another incredible display of power. This time, it was in the United Kingdom. The Kraken was even more powerful compared to when it fought off against the demon Asmodeus. This report is compiled by the reporter, Kim Young-Ho.

Sae-Jin might have overlooked this fact, but the Kraken's Stats also improved when the Leviathan Form powered up. That was why the Kraken was able to fight against Mangsasa almost one on one and win – if the final attack from the Knight affiliated with the London-based Knights Order, Romelo, was excluded, then it was not wrong to say the fight was purely one on one.

"That guy is also being included in our plan, right?" (Yi Hye-Rin) Yi Hye-Rin asked as she appreciated the Kraken's absolute might shown on the TV screen.

"But seriously... why is a squid shooting out electricity? How mysterious." (Yi Hye-Rin) That was because Sae-Jin tattooed the 'Lightning Chain Claws' to the suction pads of the Kraken.

"Yes, the Kraken is also taking part." (Sae-Jin)

"No, Sahrahng, it's Sahrahng taking part." (Hazeline) Hazeline

interjected and corrected Sae-Jin.

"Yes. Sahrahng is taking part in the battle." (Sae-Jin)

"...Its name is Sahrahng?" (Yu Baek-Song)

Yu Baek-Song tilted her head and asked back.

It was right then when some more words came out from the TV.

-This trustworthy Kraken's name is now known to be 'Sahrahng', and also the personal pet of The Monster Guild's Master, Kim Sae-Jin. Breathing a sigh of relief with the Kraken's dispatch, the UK government sent words of gratitude to Kim Sae-Jin, and also, to the Korean government who facilitated the negotiations...

"You see? The name's Sahrahng. For now, let's turn off the TV." (Sae-Jin) Sae-Jin turned the TV off. Since this was the last chance to watch it, everyone gathered here showed some regret, but it couldn't be helped.

Today's date was 22nd of December. With only three days to go before the day of the operation, and so little time left, they had to be ready to react at a moment's notice.

- "...Has everyone finished with their preparations?"

These words belonged to Lillia, coming from the communication crystal.

"We have." (Sae-Jin)

- "In that case, everyone except Mister Kim Sae-Jin, please enter the isolation barrier chamber. We've prepared a special mechanism that will transport you to where we are."
 - "...What about Mister Sae-Jin?" (Hazeline)

Hazeline asked in suspicion.

- "Mister Sae-Jin will act as a lure for Bathory."

"Isn't that too dangerous?" (Hazeline)

- "No, it won't be. Certainly, he will be in a lot less danger than us. After all, Bathory's ultimate aim is to capture the Azure Dragon alive."

"....Oh. You're right." (Hazeline)

Hazeline lightly clapped her hands and got up. Following her, Joo Ji-Hyuk, Yi Hye-Rin, Kim Sun-Ho and Rejen also got up from their seats.

"...Miss Yu Baek-Song? Aren't you coming?"

...That was, with the notable exception of Yu Baek-Song.

While twisting her body this way and that, she showed no signs of leaving Sae-Jin's side.

"What are you doing? Hurry up!!" (Hazeline)

Hazeline called out to her in a somewhat uncomfortable voice.

The surprising thing was, Hazeline and Yu Baek-Song were the same age.

"It's going to be fine. We are going to see each other again so you don't have to be like this, you know?" (Sae-Jin) Thinking that maybe she didn't want to part from him, Sae-Jin tried to speak to Yu Baek-Song while patting her head.

Almost immediately, flames lit up in Hazeline's eyes, but unaware of this development, Yu Baek-Song slightly shook her head and shyly spoke up.

"No, that's not it...." (Yu Baek-Song)

"Eh? Please say what you need." (Sae-Jin)

"....You said, that, you'll, give it to me, that thing...." (Yu Baek-Song) However, Yu Baek-Song couldn't finish what she wanted to say and simply overloaded herself. Just what was she trying to say to him?

Looking at her crimson-red blushing face, Sae-Jin smiled in deep

happiness.

"Ex, cu, se, me. I asked you what you are doing?!" (Hazeline) Hazeline's voice were full of thorns now. Yu Baek-Song got pressured by this and finally spat out what she wanted to say.

"Your smell. You said you'll let me smell it even when you're not around... you said you'll gimme a handkerchief..." (Yu Baek-Song) "......Ah."

Sae-Jin understood only then. For sure, he did say something similar to that a few weeks ago. Well, he did prepare a handkerchief but hadn't yet given to her, since he didn't want to be an afterthought from that point onwards...

"Of course, I've got it." (Sae-Jin)

Reluctantly, Sae-Jin extracted a handkerchief out from his back pocket. Created with the aid of the Magic Tattoo Skill, it was a piece of cloth where the smell of the Wolf was deeply embedded in.

"...Thanks!!"

Yu Baek-Song quickly snatched that off his hands and left Sae-Jin's side in a hurry, and ran towards Hazeline in a cute little bouncy steps.

That kinda felt slightly dejecting.

It seemed that, this body of Kim Sae-Jin was simply an ancillary existence to Yu Baek-Song. Only his body odour mattered...

"...What is that?" (Hazeline)

"Sae-Jin's smell is on it." (Yu Baek-Song)

"...Give that here." (Hazeline)

Sae-Jin overheard their conversation and smirked slightly.

"Don't wanna." (Yu Baek-Song)

"Why not? Friends are supposed to share, you know? So, let me hold it at least once." (Hazeline) "Get lost." (Yu Baek-Song)

"....W, what?! What did you just say?" (Hazeline)

Not too long after, the door to the isolation barrier chamber slammed shut.

Only thing remaining was silence.

Sitting alone on a couch that possessed the faint aroma of people, Sae-Jin was overcome with a certain sense of loneliness, but he still managed to stand up from his spot.

< 40. The Wintering (4) > Fin.

Chapter 139: A Curious Occurrence (1)

Yu Sae-Jung was waiting for him when Kim Sae-Jin returned home.

Although her face was awash with discontentment, Sae-Jin felt this was rather fortunate. He was worried that she might be still stuck at the Knights Order.

"Oppa, just what's going on with you right now?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

With her arms crossed, she bluntly spat out her words as soon as she saw his face. He simply smiled and replied.

"Just this and that. But today was the last day. I'm all done with it. From now on, I'm going to spend the holidays with you." (Sae-Jin)

"...Really?"

It seemed that her anger had cooled down a bit. A sigh of relief automatically escaped from his lips. Too bad, that ill-timed sigh ended up reigniting her fuse once more.

"I'm still angry at you, you know? Oppa, do you have any idea how many times this month alone you spent the night outside without telling me?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"...My bad."

Muttering his apology, Sae-Jin hugged Yu Sae-Jung tightly. She shouted "Don't you even think about glossing over this with only this much!!" and continued to throw a tantrum, but he didn't let go. Three minutes or so later, she grew much more quieter.

".....Oppa?"

"Mm?"

Yu Sae-Jung's voice tickling his ears was thick with worries. Was this the so-called woman's intuition? He did his best to maintain a calm face and answered her, but the worries in her trembling voice still remained palpable.

"You're not cheating on me, right?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

""

Yes, it was called an 'intuition' since it could indeed get stuff very wrong. When he looked at her with a somewhat dazed face, she quickly added something else with even more worries in her voice.

"If, if you're seeing someone else... just, just don't get found out, okay?"

What on earth was she even saying? Sae-Jin groaned out deeply and lightly stomped on her forehead with his fist.

"Euh-aht!"

A cute cry resounded out.

"You see, there are lots of women who seemed to like me out there." (Sae-Jin)

He jokingly bragged while pulling her close back into his arms.

"....You should be oh-so proud of yourself, then." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Her grumpy voice leaked out from within his embrace.

""

"What's the matter? Why aren't you saying anything? Lots of women like Oppa, so what next?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"That's just it. The only one I like is you." (Sae-Jin)

He had spend a long time in the same space with her. He had grown so accustomed to Yu Sae-Jung; she had become someone he just could not imagine not having in his life anymore.

"...What the heck. Is that all?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

Yu Sae-Jung playfully narrowed her eyes and began pinching both of his cheeks.

"Les's ghewt mawwied."

His words became garbled because of that, but he could still transmit what he wanted to say to her.

She stopped pinching his cheeks and lowered her hands, her face completely dumbstruck.

"Maybe not right now, maybe not this year, maybe not next year, but... definitely. When we can marry without any worries then..." (Sae-Jin)

Slap!!!!

One of his cheek experienced a stinging pain right then.

"Eek!! Hey, what was that for?!" (Sae-Jin)

"Ho, how can you say something like that in this kind of a situation!! You, you idiot!!" (Yu Sae-Jung)

She began shouting at him while tears formed in her eyes.

"Seriously, just what kinda proposal is this..." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Uh?! Ah... Oh, uh, yeah, uhm, this isn't a proposal, you see? No, hang on, yeah, it is a proposal in a way. It's like, I'm proposing to you that I'll make a proper proposal..." (Sae-Jin)

"You're noisy!! Outta my way!!" (Yu Sae-Jung)

Yu Sae-Jung pushed him aside and stomped her way into the kitchen. It seemed that she was royally pissed off right now, but thankfully, her voice coming out from the kitchen seemed to indicate otherwise.

"Oppa, you hungry? There's some leftover cake, would you like some?"

Late at night, on the day of the Christmas.

As soon as the short-ish meeting with Yu Sae-Jung was over, Kim Sae-Jin headed off to the East Sea. After transforming into the Leviathan, he began swimming in the ocean with only his head

peeking out of the ocean's surface. This was in order to ensure that Bathory wouldn't lose interest or run away after seeing his new body that had grown three times the previous size.

Eerie winds blew, and even the calm sounds of the waves felt rather ominous, yet Sae-Jin wasn't worried. This was in the middle of the ocean. He didn't have anything to fear here.

And as he sliced through the waters...

He sensed the cold presence of a certain someone.

He knew who it could be without using his eyes to confirm. However, Sae-Jin maintained his poker face and continued to swim, towards where Lillia's isolation barrier was located at.

He picked up the faint movement following him from behind. Sae-Jin swam leisurely and swam towards the trap set for the target.

The location of the isolation barrier trap was set in a triangular formation with three small, uninhabited rocky islands acting as the three vertices. While eagerly waiting for the Bathory woman to follow him, Sae-Jin faithfully moved towards the centre of the formation.

And then...

Just as he arrived at the destination.

A red whirlwind broke out in the air.

The whirlwind grew in ferocity and size, violently whipping the water around before it all came to a sudden halt.

The crimson winds died down and the ocean's turbulent waves also calmed down. And when the crimson winds blocking the view dissipated, a stunningly beautiful woman carrying a seductive smile revealed her graceful self.

It was none other than Prillani von Bathory.

Bathory greeted the Azure Dragon, and behind her, Rhosrahdel could be seen, smiling deeply in satisfaction. Sae-Jin the Leviathan too assumed a thick smile as well.

"Oh, my. Oh my!! Is he smiling at me right now?" (Bathory)

Bathory raised a fuss after spotting the curved lips of the 'Azure Dragon'.

"Yes, my Lady. I think you're right."

"Right? Doesn't it look like it likes me?" (Bathory)

Rhosrahdel enthusiastically agreed with her. Unfortunately, Bathory couldn't maintain her happy mood for long.

Immediately, From the bottom of the ocean, Mana began boiling like crazy, then it rose up along with the water and encased all three of them in a dome-shaped barrier.

"Mm...? Hey, kid, what is this?" (Bathory)

"I'm not sure either... Could it be, one of the Azure Dragon's abilities...?"

"Is that so? By the way, why are you going over to that side?" (Bathory)

Bathory tried her best to maintain a smile as she looked at Rhosrahdel. He had already taken refuge behind the Azure Dragon by then.

SFX for things popping out from magic circles. I think.

Soon afterwards, teleportation magic circles hidden within the barrier activated and many silhouettes emerged from there. These were Wizards wearing jet-black robes, already finished with their chantings to fire off high-level magic spells at any time.

Bathory panicked for a brief moment, before breaking out in another smile as she opened her mouth.

"...Nosferatus. So, it was you b*stards. I guessed as much.

Inferior breeds are unable to coexist in harmony with the purebloods, after all."

Bathory sneered in contempt and wielded Mana stored in every part of her body.

No, she tried to.

However, Mana didn't move an inch. It was as if her blood vessels had all been blocked up.

Finally realising the urgency of the situation, she hurriedly searched for the one responsible for this strange magic. But every one of them were wearing the identical black robe and it was impossible to tell them apart.

"You no-good sons of bi*ches...!!"

Thoroughly enraged by now, Bathory unconsciously rushed forward. She didn't need things like Mana. No, with the constitution of Bathory, that unbelievably powerful physical body alone would be enough to sweep away these uncouth rabble of inferior breeds...

CLANG!!

However, a weighty greatsword appeared seemingly out of nowhere and blocked her progress. It was Joo Ji-Hyuk's doing. He did succeed in delaying her for around two seconds, but...

"Get lost!!"

...But, he was unable to completely withstand her angry attacks.

KWAHANG!!

The greatsword was powerlessly shoved away and Joo Ji-Hyuk was flung away to the corner of the barrier like a ragdoll.

But, Joo Ji-Hyuk wasn't the only Knight here. Past the head of the flying Joo Ji-Hyuk, a sharp sword aura slithered forward like a snake and sliced a couple strands of Bathory's hair. SFX for falling hair

Red strands of hair fell to the bottom of the isolation barrier.

Unconsciously stepping back a couple of times, Bathory confirmed her faintly damaged hair, and roared out to the high heavens in pure rage.

[...Kobac Grohack!!]

Bathory shouted out some undecipherable words and was about to rush towards Yi Hye-Rin's direction.

But then, countless magic spells rained down on her position.

Dark red flashes of light beams, spheres of condensed destructive power, curses filled to the brim with resentment – at this hail storm of approaching spells, even Bathory had no choice but to stop what she was trying to do.

SFX for a loud sweeping sound

The combined might of the spells were incredible enough to scar the isolation barrier semi-permanently, and the shock wave coming off from the resulting explosion was harsh enough to make all the listeners bleed from their ears.

However, there was one more attack that could easily be described as a sure-kill still left to be unleashed.

And that was the 'Mana cannon' busy gathering in the Azure Dragon's maws.

This was the finishing move that Sae-Jin learned after ingesting the adult Leviathan's scale. It was the true one-hit kill Skill where he gathered every bit of Mana from both his body as well as from the ocean around him, to fire out and annihilate the enemy in front.

No matter who or what the target was, all things would 'disappear' without a trace when struck by this Mana cannon. Didn't matter the shape or form of the physical body, elemental

preference, Traits, whatever.

Even 'light' was not spared. Within the path where the Mana cannon swept past, darkness dyed the world black.

That was why, not even Bathory herself could survive this devastating attack.

"..!!"

However – less than ten seconds after the battle broke out.

One of the Wizards wearing the black robe suddenly collapsed.

And at the same time, at the location where the magic spells from the Wizards were raining down, a powerful Mana rose up like an ascending dragon.

Bathory was in the middle of emitting the dense, red-coloured Mana to her surroundings, while her melted down skin and maimed limbs were rapidly recovering by themselves.

"Stop her!!"

Someone shouted out, prompting Yi Hye-Rin, Yu Baek-Song and Rejen to step forward at the same time. But, Yi Hye-Rin's Mana dissipated powerlessly the moment it came in contact with Bathory, and instead, a blood-red whip slammed into Hye-Rin's chest. She got squarely hit and spat out a mouthful of blood, before collapsing helplessly.

"ROAR-!!"

Yu Baek-Song transformed into the divine beast and rushed in. The Giant White Tiger swung its front paw hard. Bathory simply blocked it with only an arm and fired off a light beam at the side of the tiger.

At the same time, Rejen emerged from under the body of the White Tiger and her blade pierced deep into Bathory's heart.

"Euck!!"

Bathory quickly reorganised her Mana and slashed at Rejen's arms, but then...

KHANG!!

The front paw of the White Tiger slammed into her head, hard.

"....That hurts, you know?" (Bathory)

Unfortunately, Bathory didn't die. No, she instead carried a leisurely smile as she grabbed the neck of the tiger.

Gheeeeuhhh...

The White Tiger was clearly in distress, yet it continued to punch Bathory's head. But the future Vampire queen showed no adverse reaction, only her grip on the tiger's throat was getting tighter and tighter.

It was then.

"Get out of the way!!"

20 seconds had passed in total.

A time way too long in the context of this battle flew past, but by then, the Mana cannon was fully charged. Lillia loudly shouted out at the same time. Yu Baek-Song quickly cancelled the transformation and retreated to a safe distance.

Almost immediately, a huge and massive white ray of light engulfed Bathory.

Afterwards...

One might have gotten confused that even the sound was eradicated within the isolation barrier.

The sounds of breathing, sounds of swallowing saliva, none of them could be heard.

Everyone stared dumbfoundedly at the space where the Mana cannon swept by. Would the world look like this if it was burnt black? They all stood there and 'appreciatively' gazed at the unnatural darkness etched on to the world – until an urgent cry shattered this silence.

"Wait!! The finger!!"

Lillia hurriedly fired a Mana Spear at a stump of a finger rolling around on the bottom of the barrier.

But alas, it was too late.

That small finger violently expelled the red Mana and blocked the enemy's attack, and then, rapidly regenerated into...

"....Well, I died four times because of a strange magic." (Bathory)

...The finger fully regenerated into Bathory. While cracking her joints, she took a look around at her opponents.

"You guys, I guess you have a close relationship with my Yong-Yong, huh?" (Bathory)

Bathory spoke as she stared down at her enemies.

She died a total of five times today. She so wanted to rip apart every single one of these mongrels here, but if she got killed one more time, then that would be the end for her. Considering that she also needed to tear apart this stupid barrier, quite regrettably she no longer had the spare capacity to handle the additional danger.

Also... Yong-Yong was busy sucking up endless Mana from the ocean right at this moment. If she dallied any longer, it might fire off that outrageous beam attack again.

"Oh well.... it doesn't matter, really. I really enjoy taking away things from others, you see." (Bathory)

While holding her side that hadn't fully regenerated yet, Bathory fired off a magic bullet that was comprised of condensed and uberintense flames at the isolation barrier's wall. What with the Mana reserve of the Wizards maintaining the barrier falling quite low, a magic bullet the size of a baseball could easily pierce a gap in the

barrier.

The complexions of the Wizards turned ashen.

Bathory didn't have time to waste here. She immediately rushed towards the Leviathan, and grabbed its neck tightly.

And then...

Puff!!

...She disappeared, along with her catch.

That was a spell where chanting nor a magic circle was needed. This was way past the boundaries of normal magic – the so-called 'instant transmission'. (TL: LOL. DBZ reference FTW!!)

".....Huh?!"

The thought processes of everyone present stopped dead in their tracks.

What happened just now? They even found this hard to figure out.

Even after the isolation barrier shattered into nothingness, not one of them could say a single word for a long, long while.

< 41. A Curious Occurrence (1) > Fin.

Chapter 140: A Curious Occurrence (2)

It was an incredibly unpleasant and uncomfortable sensation when Sae-Jin's body went through 'changes' during the instant transmission. After experiencing the unpleasantness of his entire body breaking down to molecular level, and then getting rebuilt in a flash, Sae-Jin staggered as he opened his eyes.

He found himself trapped inside this oppressively dark space, and right away, spotted Bathory keeled over on the ground not too far, busy vomiting out mouthful of blood.

The first thing he thought of was "Is this another chance?"

Unfortunately though – the Mana cannon was a one-hit-kill attack that sucked up every drop of Mana from inside his body as well as from the outside. Regrettably, he didn't have much Mana left within him.

SFX for vomit. Yuck.

Bathory made uncool noises as she continued to vomit out blood. However, Sae-Jin already understood that her actions were actually a part of the recovery process, where she expelled dead blood out of her body to replace it with fresh one instead. It was one of the bits of knowledge he gained after ingesting the scale of the adult Leviathan.

However, he had no idea why the knowledge about Vampires were recorded within the scale, though.

Whatever the case may have been, he couldn't help but worry about the near future when her pain would be replaced by her fury.

Since he heard that Bathory liked torturing people, there were more reasons now to spin his brain faster than ever before.

It was then, he recalled a certain Skill called the 'Dark Energy Link'. This Skill received a few additional upgrades when he 'evolved', so its usefulness had increased by a great deal.

And among these new additions, the bits of text gleaming quite nicely within Sae-Jin's recollection were as thus:

[Dark Energy Link]

- Not only emotions such as 'Fear' and 'Terror', but even physical sensations such as 'Pain' and 'Pleasure' can be used to form the Link.
- However, when the Link is formed with sensation as the medium, while the experienced sensation will be shared, no other functions will manifest.

Obviously, a Link of submission formed with fear and terror would not work against a bigshot like Bathory. On the flip side, though – the Link formed with 'sensation' could be a possibility. Plus, she was currently experiencing acute pain right now.

However, no matter how strong the Leviathan Form was compared to his other Forms, the Dark Energy Link was a Skill he needed to use in the Lycanthrope Form to bring about the best results. But, for now, he maintained the Leviathan Form and sneaked in closer to Bathory's position.

"You shouldn't waste your time, darling. You can't hurt me. We are not in the ocean anymo... Bleurgh."

While listening to her chilly declaration and the follow-up noise of retching, Sae-Jin cautiously activated the Eyes of the Wolf. He could sort of see a 'shadow' of pain hovering near her back. But he found out that, as a Leviathan, he couldn't pull that energy towards him and form a link.

He closed his eyes. He told himself that he only needed to succeed once.

Now normally, those who enjoyed being cruel towards others would not be able to adjust to being treated cruelly in return – most of the time.

The body of the Leviathan began to shrink before anyone could notice it.

The head of the dragon changed to a shape of a person's, while the shrinking body morphed into one with four limbs. Shoulders broad enough to seemingly carry five grown men's heads without a problem, and slick, tightly packed muscles rippling in his arms. And, the wild, macho silvery fur that warmly covered that rockhard body...

He changed into the Lycanthrope.

Now that he looked through this beast's eyes, the dark energy hovering on top of the woman was far more distinct and clearer.

The only strand of energy he could touch right now was 'pain'. So, Sae-Jin extended his finger and beckoned the link for 'pain' to come closer. That energy strand tightly wound around his finger. Sae-Jin cautiously studied this, before...

Kwack!!

He grabbed the energy and shoved it down his throat.

Immediately, Bathory's eyes shifted towards his direction, and at the same time, several alert windows popped up into his view.

[The Dark Energy Link has been established against an overwhelmingly powerful existence!]

[Condition complete: Swallow the Heavens (1/2)]

[All Stats for the Lycanthrope Form will increase by a large margin!]

[The Lycanthrope Form's unique Skill, 'Senses of a Wolf' has been acquired!]

[When the last condition is met, the Lycanthrope Form will evolve into the final stage.]

His muscles and bones issued cracking noises as the body of the Lycanthrope began rapidly increasing in its size. Bathory completely turned around after sensing the disturbing presence, and when she saw him, she completely lost her sh*t.

"&^%#!!! What the hell!! Who the f*ck are you, you disgusting scum?!"

She violently swung her arms around. Sae-Jin belatedly raised his arms to block her, but the power behind her wild swings totally transcended his imagination. Bones in his arms shattered into smithereens, and the shock wave slammed into his innards, blowing up several internal organs.

It was such a nonsensically powerful attack, had he been a normal person, he would have died instantly.

Fortunately enough, that pain was shared with her, too. And no, it wasn't some sympathetic sharing of pain – instead, she would feel the full brunt of the physical pain Sae-Jin experienced in that moment.

That was why it should be considered normal to see her screaming her lungs out in a high pitched tone.

"Kkyaaaaaaahck!!!!"

Bathory screamed and collapsed on the ground. From now on, it was a battle of recuperative powers and endurance between the two. Who could recover faster, and who could endure more pain?

Sae-Jin was feeling confident of his odds. After all, the Lycanthropes of the legends were often called the 'race of immortal youth' thanks to the vitality and regenerative powers that far outstripped other races. And on top of this, he had over 100 healing and recovery potions 'Spiritualised' and stored within his body right at this moment, as well.

Some people might call all the preparations he did simply excessive, but the very notion of that being 'bad' was utter garbage. The more, the better. Anytime.

[Kobhack!!]

Completely recovering in the blink of an eye, Bathory spat out a word that kind of sounded like a curse word while reaching out towards Sae-Jin's direction.

And so, the chain of one-sided beating and mutual sharing of resulting pain, began in earnest.

The secret conference room was shrouded in a heavy atmosphere. Everyone present carried somber expressions and spoke not a word. Without a doubt, their plan failed. Of course, it was still somewhat more palatable result than being wiped out.

But, no one dared to raise this point. The importance of the person kidnapped was just too high for that.

SFX for the second hand of the clock ticking away

The heavy silence, where only the ticking of the second hand could be heard, finally got broken by the alarm tone coming off from someone's mobile phone.

Kim Sun-Ho hesitatingly pulled out his phone, and after checking out the message on the screen, let out a long sigh.

"...Well, it's from Miss Yu Sae-Jung. What should I do?"

At the same time, several sighs also leaked out.

And as everyone here were wondering how to reply to Yu Sae-Jung, Yu Baek-Song stepped up with a serious face.

"We keep everything as a secret from Yu Sae-Jung." (Yu Baek-Song)

".....After hiding the truth, and then what?" (Hazeline)

Hazeline asked, her voice trembling heavily. She cried her eyes out so much, they were all puffed up beyond recognition.

"As long as Kim Sae-Jin remains as a Leviathan, he won't die. All we have to do is rescue him." (Yu Baek-Song)

"With us alone?" (Hazeline)

"With other people, too." (Yu Baek-Song)

"No, wait. You, listen here..." (Hazeline)

Hazeline wanted to say something to counter her, but in the end, she became overcome with emotions and buried her face on the table once more. The sound of her soft sobbing seemed to blanket the silent conference room.

"....Stop crying, you idiot. The news of the Azure Dragon being kidnapped will be enough. Koreans love the Azure Dragon, after all. When we break the news that the Vampires have kidnapped the Azure Dragon, they will help us. Yup, I'm sure of it."

Said Yu Baek-Song, as she gently stroked Hazeline's head. It was a somewhat funny scene where a shorty that looked like a middle schooler was busy consoling a full-grown adult, but not one person here laughed at that.

"What do you think, Lillia? About my plan?" (Yu Baek-Song)

- "If all the Highest Tier Knights in the country volunteer to help, then we might have a chance, but under the current circumstance, the odds of it happening are quite slim."

Boss Monsters were still raising a ruckus all over the world even now. The frequency of their appearances had increased by so much, one popped up almost every other week. Thanks to this, there were more than a few frontlines set up to confront the Monsters.

However, to snatch away the services of Highest Tier Knights under this kind of situation? It would be akin to setting the storehouse on fire just to catch a lice.

- "And also, seeing that Bathory hadn't returned to the hotel, it is likely that she has settled down elsewhere."

[&]quot; "

Another heavy silence descended on the room. They tried their best to come up with something, but couldn't think of anything useful.

The only thing still flowing freely within this silence was the ceaseless sobbing coming from Hazeline.

Inside the jet-black interior.

It was impossible to tell whether this was inside some kind of a closed-off space, or the luxury hotel Bathory was staying. But it really didn't matter either way. Because of all the blood coating pretty much everywhere, this whole place looked too gruesome to look, anyway.

[Gaom croshack!!]

Sae-Jin heard a queer speech coming from somewhere. When he turned to look, he spotted Bathory lying on the floor, just like him, busy glaring at him with bloodshot eyes. So, so much crazy killing intent contained within her glare.

"Speak in Korean. I can't understand you." (Sae-Jin)

He leisurely laughed and replied to her. The coincidental level up meant that, the only way to break the now-more powerful Dark Energy Link was for the owner – him – to personally severe the connection. No matter how many times she hit him, nothing would change.

"My Yong-Yong... You dirty, scummy canine b*stard, you dare to trick me?" (Bathory)

"And just what did I trick you with?" (Sae-Jin)

Bathory grit her teeth in anger. But she didn't do anything else besides. She was probably exhausted as well.

"...Well, it doesn't matter. In any case, as soon as I fully recover, you're a dead meat." (Bathory)

Bathory spoke with a manufactured smile on her face.

"Fuht. You think I'll let you?" (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin sneered and slashed at her face with his claws.

Thanks to his lucky level up, his claws were much stronger now. Their hardness could exceed that of the earth's greatest metal, mithril. So, at a bare minimum, they should be able to inflict some sort of damage to the clearly-weakened Bathory.

SFX for wounds inflicted. I think.

Four claw lines slashed out at an oblique angle.

"Kkhyack!!"

She screamed out at this unexpected attack and rolled around the floor in pain. However, he didn't feel a thing. Well, the thing was, this Dark Energy Link came with a certain convenient feature that benefited the owner, somewhat.

In a way, it was like, 'what's yours is yours, and what's mine is mine', that kinda thing.

That's why, he needed to continuously torment her. To make sure that she would never recover her vitality, and that she wouldn't be able to endure any longer and let him go.

"You son of a bi*ch!!"

Bathory screamed out a couple of choice words and kicked Sae-Jin in the side. His ribs shattered from the impact, but that also meant Bathory's were also shattered, too.

"Ah, argh, eu-ah-ahrng..." (Bathory)

"Stop doing things that will be painful for both of us."

Sae-Jin quickly recovered thanks to the effects of potions, and began taunting her. Her eyes snapped wide open and shouted at him.

"You shut up!!" (Bathory)

"Hmph. I should pay you back for your rude words."

Strictly speaking, he didn't learn this attack to use in moments like this, but whatever – he decided to use the 'Lightning Chain Claw'. Immediately, purple-coloured arcs of electricity buzzed and circulated around his extended claws. Bathory saw this and her entire body trembled imperceptibly.

"You!! You better stop!! I said, stop!!! I'm warning you!! A warni... Bzzzzzzzz...."

He ignored her and slashed at her entire torso. Even though her body was shaking from the pain of the electricity, she didn't submit to it and thrust forward her hand into Sae-Jin's heart.

...Without the regenerative potions, he'd have probably died three times over by now.

His sight blurred and his consciousness darkened.

When he reopened his eyes after losing his consciousness for a brief second or two, he spotted Bathory next to him, weaving in and out of slumber herself.

"Ha-ah, ha-ah..." (Bathory)

He stealthily approached her and stabbed his claw into her neck.

"Eiii, you f*cking..." (Bathory)

Her eyes snapped open, and with an expression that said she had enough of this sh*t, she shoved her fingers into Sae-Jin's eye sockets.

"Just die already, you scummy son of a bi*ch!!" (Bathory)

"You first." (Sae-Jin)

*

In the end, a cease-fire occurred between him and Bathory. He told her to release him, but she resolutely refused to do so. She said that, she would keep him around until she found a way to

exterminate him.

And so, a curious co-habitation begun.

The place was an empty, isolated space probably maintained by Bathory herself. Trapped within, both of them didn't eat anything nor did anything. Except, for the childish tauntings thrown at each other's way.

"You hungry now? You moron. You see, I'm the perfect Vampire, so I only need to eat something once a year and that's all, you know?" (Bathory)

"I can rip off your arm and snack on that, so it's fine." (Sae-Jin)

"Who says I'll let you snack on me?!" (Bathory)

Thanks to the Dark Energy Link, Bathory couldn't kill him. If she wounded him fatally, then that damage would transmit in full towards her as well. However, in case of something going wrong, he had to prevent her from using a magic spell that might exceed his Skill, so he needed to constantly hurt her.

".....Fuu."

Bathory groaned out a lengthy sigh and got up. He extended his claws and slashed at her back and her waist. Deep, horrendous wounds opened up, and she fell back down on the ground once more.

"Ah-euhck!! Hey, you crazy b*stard!!" (Bathory)

"I'm telling you, it'll be better for you to release me now. What do you think will happen when my friends show up? Will you be able to fight them off in your current condition?" (Sae-Jin)

"Shut up!!"

Instead of a proper answer, Bathory fed him a knuckle sandwich to his face.

< 41. A Curious Occurrence (2) > Fin.

Chapter 141: A Curious Occurrence (3)

Yi Hye-Rin and Joo Ji-Hyuk went to the East Sea – or, more specifically, to a small hut located inside a forest near the East Sea.

The salty scent blowing inland by the calm waves was gently permeating the land, and the rays of the sun high up in the sky shining down got broken into a beautiful cascade by the gaps of leaves on trees.

Within this brilliant verdant landscape, her hut silently stood still.

"If we're to value the land according to the view, this place should easily fetch over \$90 million, don't you think?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

Yi Hye-Rin glanced at Joo Ji-Hyuk and asked him.

"Probably." (Joo Ji-Hyuk)

Just like how he was during the last 30 minutes of hiking, his answer proved to be no fun at all. It was so dry and indifferent.

Yi Hye-Rin clicked her tongue in dissatisfaction, and increased her walking pace towards the hut. Joo Ji-Hyuk silently followed her.

"Should I knock?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

Joo Ji-Hyuk nodded wordlessly. Seeing his especially stone-hard expressions of today, she was getting more and more annoyed but right now, the circumstances meant that she couldn't express her disappointment. So, Yi Hye-Rin glared at him fiercely once instead, and then cautiously knocked on the door.

Knock, knock

Winds rustled past the silent forest, causing the branches to issue a slightly sorrowful wail. Did she not hear the knocking, because of the cries of the trees? Yi Hye-Rin knocked on the door again. Only then, she could sense a faint sense of movement behind the door.

Soon after, click. A lock that wouldn't have mattered if it wasn't there, unlatched.

"Who is... oh, Hye-Rin? Even Knight Joo Ji-Hyuk, too?"

Was it because of the blinding sunshine? A woman so beautiful, that even the fellow woman Yi Hye-Rin couldn't help but blush, revealed herself.

Underneath her hair cascading like a curtain of silk, her intricate facial features seem to shine brightly. Elegantly-carved lips, eyes that seemed to have somewhat mellowed greatly, straight and perfectly defined nose, plus the pure and pale-smooth skin – her beauty was enough to cause a serious confusion on figuring out whether she was an Elf or a human being.

"What brings you guys here?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"....." (Yi Hye-Rin & Joo Ji-Hyuk)

A clean and pure echo, created by a masterpiece of a neck – even her voice sounded stunningly beautiful.

Yi Hye-Rin stared at Kim Yu-Rin dazedly for a long while, before her head snapped to her side, out of the blue. And as she suspected, Joo Ji-Hyuk was standing there, his mouth agape.

"Pretending to be serious and all that, and now, you...!!" (Yi Hye-Rin)

Anger rushed up and took over; Yi Hye-Rin slammed her fist right in the middle of Joo Ji-Hyuk's solar plexus. From the gaping mouth of Joo Ji-Hyuk, an unidentifiable liquid that could either be his spit or blood dribbled out.

*

Yi Hye-Rin and Joo Ji-Hyuk moved on from that small commotion and entered the hut.

It wasn't spacious inside, but there was this sense of cozy snugness and a certain affection present to this place. Yi Hye-Rin smiled gently and surveyed the interior for a bit, before finding a bunch of stuff that weren't there before taking up space here and there.

And they were... cute stuffed dolls.

There was a doll of Athany, a doll of a certain white bird resembling the Korean crow-tit, a doll of the Azure Dragon... and finally, even a doll that kinda, sorta looked like an Orc. And the doll that was suspected to be replica of the Orc took up the best location of them all, right above Kim Yu-Rin's bed.

"Wha, what are you doing? Please, hurry and come in and don't look at the weird stuff." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Becoming embarrassed all of a sudden, Kim Yu-Rin dragged the two of them towards a small coffee table. There were only two chairs here; Yu-Rin settled down on the corner of the bed, while Joo Ji-Hyuk and Yi Hye-Rin took up the available chairs.

"Have you guys eaten yet?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"No, not ye..." (Joo Ji-Hyuk)

"Yeah, we ate before coming here." (Yi Hye-Rin)

Yi Hye-Rin hastily covered the tactless Joo Ji-Hyuk's mouth and replied in his stead.

"Oh, really? Then, what about a cup of tea?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"We don't need tea either, Captain." (Yi Hye-Rin)

Yi Hye-Rin placed an emphasis on the word 'Captain' as she replied. Kim Yu-Rin assumed a faint smile.

"When are you coming back? It's been too long a break for a postop trauma, you know." (Yi Hye-Rin)

The very first vacation Kim Yu-Rin went on in ten years of her career was already almost half a year long now. And, what with the

justification of 'recovering from the after-effects of a medical procedure' added on top, all the higher ups of the Raven Knights Order could do was to impatiently stomp on their feet and wait.

No, it wasn't just the Raven Order, but the entire country was stomping on their feet as well.

"...Sorry. Please wait for a little bit longer. I'd like to enjoy it for a while longer, this vacation I've never had before." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Her will was gentle, yet unyielding. Yi Hye-Rin spat out a long sigh and took a look around the interior of the hut once more.

"Just what exactly are you doing here all alone? Sure, the view looks great, but it's not like you can stare at the nature all the time, right?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

"Fuhut, does it look like that? However, there are more things to do here than you think." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin's eyes gently arched. Yi Hye-Rin complained in her heart that such enticingly smiling eyes were an infringement of rules, and took a quick glance at Joo Ji-Hyuk. Instead of his mouth, his eyes were wide open this time.

"I can go out fishing, read a book in comfort, and even meditate to gain clarity on things I failed to realise before. Probably, my Trait could have gone up a level like this?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

" "

Yi Hye-Rin wordlessly glared at Kim Yu-Rin, then her gaze drifted towards a small stuffed doll of a wolf lying on top of the coffee table. It was a seriously adorable little thing. But besides that fatally attractive cuteness, a faint aura coming off it caused a slight desire to possess it to settle on a small corner of her mind.

"Heu, hmm." (Kim Yu-Rin)

As if she got worried about Yi Hye-Rin asking for it, Kim Yu-Rin stealthily hugged the doll and bashfully came up with excuses for

her action.

"....All the dolls in here, the Guild Master Kim Sae-Jin brought along as presents, you know. He said that it's because I might get bored vacationing alone. I definitely didn't buy them, you see. T, that is why, I can't give them to anyone else. If I do, it'd be like I'm not taking his good intentions seriously..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin spoke these words since, in actuality, she didn't want to give them away anyways.

However, at the same time those words left her mouth, both of her guests froze up stiff.

After all, Kim Sae-Jin had been kidnapped. By a nonsensically powerful being no less, and his current whereabouts were completely unknown.

Kim Yu-Rin's eyes widened at this sudden change in the atmosphere and she quickly looked at both of them.

"What? What's the matter... Can it be?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

With tears forming in her eyes, Yi Hye-Rin dropped her head, Joo Ji-Hyuk gritted his teeth and stared off into the distance instead.

"Did something happen to him?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin stood up from her spot with a surprised face.

Two of them was unable to say anything for a while. After all, Sae-Jin's Trait was a big secret. However, in order to persuade Kim Yu-Rin, the secret had to come out in the open.

"What, what happened?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin hurriedly asked again. Yi Hye-Rin sighed out softly and studied Joo Ji-Hyuk's mood for a bit. He nodded his head once.

"Fuu... Okay, please listen closely, Captain. Actually, the Guild Master's Trait is... he can transform into a Monster." (Yi Hye-Rin)

".....What?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Immediately, Kim Yu-Rin's expression blanked out. But before long, the shock of this revelation quickly reassembled all the information percolating in her brain.

And well, a look of shock even greater than before lit up on her face.

A Trait where a person could turn into a Monster. And then, the Hero Orc and Kim Sae-Jin.

In that case, could it be...

And as her mouth continued to open and shut like a goldfish, unable to swim out from the enormous shock...

"What do you mean, a Monster? It's the Azure Dragon." (Joo Ji-Hyuk)

Joo Ji-Hyuk's words brought a temporary relief to Kim Yu-Rin's mind currently being ravaged by the shock waves.

"Ah, you're right. The Azure Dragon isn't a Monster." (Yi Hye-Rin)

"The A, Azure Dragon...? Not an Orc?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin dazedly asked back.

"That's correct. Mister Sae-Jin can transform into the Azure Dragon. But what do you mean by the Orc? You're still thinking about that guy?!" (Yi Hye-Rin)

"Ah... No, no. It's, it's nothing." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Yi Hye-Rin replied while carrying a bitter smile.

And Kim Yu-Rin dazedly nodded her head, while feeling a conflicting emotion that she couldn't distinguish whether it was relief or frustration.

[THE MONSTER]

We'd like to cordially extend our invitation towards you for the greatest party to be held by The Monster.

The Vice President of the Great Wisdom Investments, Kim Jong-Hyuk-nim, we sincerely hope that you can attend and brighten the party with your presence.

=========

"I think this should be enough, right? Oi, I sent out the invitation to all the celebs as you told me to. Is that cool?" (Yu Baek-Song)

When Yu Baek-Song asked while studying the invitation card, Rhosrahdel nodded his head. As an aside, as he was working as a double agent until now, he no longer had a place to return to anymore, so he decided to completely to stick to this group of people.

"Yes. Currently, there is an Elder assigned to Kim Jong-Hyuk, so the odds of that Elder accompanying Jong-Hyuk to the party is very good. After all, there will be plenty of juicy, fat prey to be taken under the mind control spells in a high-society party held by The Monster." (Rhosrahdel)

"So, then, we catch that Elder and make him sing where Bathory woman is hiding, is that it?" (Yu Baek-Song)

"That's correct. Elders are proficient in hiding their identities so not even the best security equipment can find them, but it should be fine since I'll be present there as well." (Rhosrahdel)

"Hmph. Good. I'll leave it to you." (Yu Baek-Song)

As soon as Yu Baek-Song finished declaring like a boss, the doors to the underground secret conference room got abruptly pushed open.

It was the pair of Yi Hye-Rin and Joo Ji-Hyuk, who went out earlier while saying they were going to fetch someone. And it seemed that they have succeeded in their quest – there was one more person following the duo.

"We've brought along the best reinforcement ever~!" (Yi Hye-Rin)

Hearing Yi Hye-Rin's energetic voice, Hazeline took a glance towards her direction.

And, at the same time, when her eyes met that person's, Hazeline's body went rigid in an instant.

It was the same for Kim Yu-Rin as well.

It was only the first day where the inside of the isolation barrier was full of sliced-off flesh bits and coated with mountains of blood; now, this place looked complete opposite of that. It was most likely that Bathory was the so-called clean and neat freak – although this closed-off space was on the small side, as she could modify it to suit her tastes and better reflect her state of mind, now it more or less resembled a high class hotel suite instead.

"A Lycanthrope... Yeah, I've heard about your kind before. Seriously, your recovery speed is really annoying." (Bathory)

Bathory spoke so, her body deeply cocooned within a luxurious sofa. She was wearing a red dress that must've had an issue with the amount of materials available during the manufacturing process as it was dangerously small, and it also happened to be quite revealing in all the critical areas.

"Whatever. But you... What are you? You also have a Trait? How can you still survive only with a single finger left?" (Sae-Jin)

"Hmm.... Are you curious?" (Bathory)

Bathory slowly traced her lips with her fingers. It was a needlessly seductive gesture.

"You'll tell me if I say I am curious?" (Sae-Jin)

"Well, it's not like I can't tell you. You're going to die by my hands soon anyway. Killing you after resolving your curiosity could be seen as me being benevolent, am I right?" (Bathory)

While speaking some confident words, she formed a bright and innocent, child-like smile. It seemed that she was greatly enjoying this situation for some reason.

"Now, pay attention." (Bathory)

Bathory opened her hand. Red-coloured Mana buzzed on her palm like electricity.

"The Mana of Vampires is red in colour. Because, we tend to 'use' Mana and blood at the same. Lower lifeforms can't do this, of course. To mongrels such as yourself, blood is nothing more than just blood, after all." (Bathory)

Mana buzzing atop her palm like violent arcs of electricity suddenly coalesced and formed a spike-like shape.

"Vampires pass on their strength via bloodlines. And my bloodline is the most special and excellent among every other bloodline out there. That is why I can use dozens and dozens of 'sorcery' spells those cheap Elf Wizards could never perform, and my flesh and bones are several dozen times stronger than even the most powerful Soo-in warriors in the world." (Bathory)

In a split second, the reddish spike dancing in her palm increased in length and shot towards Sae-Jin's neck. He ended up swallowing down his saliva unconsciously – the deadly spike had stopped just short of pressing against his Adam's apple.

"But, the thing that is even more impressive than that, is..." (Bathory)

Khugugugung!!

A deafening noise exploded out and at the same time, Mana began boiling all over Bathory's body. It was like seeing steam rise from the boiling water – her entire body changed into that of pure

Mana.

The reddish Mana became a dense fog and slowly drifted towards Sae-Jin, before gradually changing back into the shape of Bathory once more.

"You see, my blood... it's Mana itself." (Bathory)

With an elegant smile on her lips, she sensuously stroked Sae-Jin's cheek and spoke. Seeing how dazed Sae-Jin was after witnessing that dream-like scene, Bathory didn't stop there and her hand inched further south. From his face, to his neck; from his neck, to his collarbone; and from his collarbone, to his lower abdomen...

"Oi." (Sae-Jin)

Just as her hand had lowered enough...

The baritone voice of the Wolf heavily descended to her ears.

"What's the matter? Are you perhaps getting excited...?" (Bathory)

Bathory sneered in contempt as she looked at Sae-Jin's face.

Ahgeujack!!

And at the same time, still in the Lycanthrope Form, Sae-Jin bit into her neck.

"Kkyack!! Seriously?! This stupid son of a bi*ch!!" (Bathory)

Suffering from the unexpected sneak attack, Bathory powerfully punched his upper torso, and as he flew away from the impact, he inadvertently ended up swallowing bits of her blood and flesh.

"Argh!! Phew, spit!!" (Sae-Jin)

"Groan... Ouch, that hurts..." (Bathory)

"Argh, that's some disgusting shi...." (Sae-Jin)

Kim Sae-Jin was opening his mouth to swear like a sailor – but all of a sudden, an alert window popped up into view.

In that moment, his head stopped thinking, and his heart ceased beating altogether.

[The host has ingested the Bathory blood. The Lycanthrope's unique Skill, 'Senses of a Wolf' is activated, and now, the host can gain an understanding of, and acquire, the strength of a Bathory, according to the amount absorbed!]

< 41. A Curious Occurrence (3) > Fin.

Chapter 142: Rescue (1)

"Ouch... Seriously, this son of a bi*ch..."

Bathory was rolling around the floor, tears forming on the corners of her eyes. Obviously, she wasn't wounded heavily. She was simply faking it.

"I'll definitely, without a doubt, kill you with my own hands, so you better look forward to it! I'm gonna so rip apart your bones, your muscles, your organs and, and..." (Bathory)

Ignoring Bathory's venomous curses, Sae-Jin quickly looked through his Skill windows. Unlike every other Skill he possessed, this new one didn't have a Proficiency Level indicator, just a whole bunch of explanations instead.

[Senses of a Wolf]

- A unique set of senses possessed by only the excellent individuals of Lycanthrope species.

A Lycanthrope who has awakened this ability will see his or her five senses, as well as the 'sixth sense', become extremely perceptive when transformed into the Wolf physique. Can be referred to as the 'transcendental senses', and when certain conditions are met, performing a faint premonition of the future becomes possible.

– Also, by absorbing blood of certain specific targets, it also becomes possible to understand and accept a part of the target's powers. This is the result of the instincts of the Wolf perfectly aligning with the 'transcendental senses', and the more blood the host absorbs, the deeper his understanding will become.

-The current target: Bathory

[Degree of Progression: 0.35%]

[Items possible to absorb (understand) currently] - unique

structure of the muscles, unbelievably high bone density – [Degree of Advancement: 3%]

Although the two terms with rather similar definition, 'Degree of Progression' and 'Degree of Advancement', were separated into different categories, it wasn't all that hard to figure out what was going on.

The former indicated the percentage left until he could absorb every bit of Bathory's powers, while the latter most likely indicated the percentage left until the parts of her power – in this case, her endurance and strength – were fully absorbed.

And, to increase both the Degrees of Progression and Advancement – in other words, to become stronger – he had to drink Bathory's blood.

"....Hey, you. You think you can escape from this place alive or something?" (Bathory)

While he was deeply immersed in his thoughts, Bathory sneered at him.

"Obviously." (Sae-Jin)

He replied full of spirit, but thanks to this new development, thoughts of escaping had vanished, at least for now. There was a mountain of experience points that would never run out right in front him, after all.

"Truly, what a pitiful idiot." (Bathory)

Bathory smirked. Sae-Jin glared at her for a while, before throwing a question at her. He was trying to piss her off, and thereby create a situation where he would be able to drink her blood.

"Oh, really? So, you really think you're all going back to your original home world?" (Sae-Jin)

Her brows furrowed slightly. However, the answer he heard

afterwards was way too resolute and at the same time, quite easygoing as well, as if to deny that faint possibility of uncertainty.

"...Of course we are." (Bathory)

"You too are also a pitiful idiot." (Sae-Jin)

Chweeiiick!!

In the blink of an eye, Bathory's Mana flew out in the shape of a spike and stabbed him right in the shoulder. While suffering from this immense pain, a strange scene that could either be the past or the future brushed past his mind.

"Watch... Keheuck. You better watch your mouth." (Bathory)

At the same time, the pain Sae-Jin was going through was shared in full with Bathory as well, but still, while shedding sweat drops, she coldly warned him. Sae-Jin wordlessly stared at her for a bit, before...

"....Yeah, you're right. Maybe, you can go back." (Sae-Jin)

...He spoke while recalling the images that had faintly etched within his minds.

Kim Yu-Rin gritted her teeth as she glared at Hazeline. Unfortunately, Hazeline lacked the spare willpower to receive such a gaze, so she lowered her head at an oblique angle.

Between the two, a sharp atmosphere as keen as a prized sword hung about.

And the rest of the members present who didn't know the full story could only tilt their heads in confusion.

"Wha, what are you doing, Captain?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

Yi Hye-Rin hurriedly shook the shoulders of Kim Yu-Rin, who was standing stiff in cold anger as if she was ready to draw her weapon out in the open. However, Kim Yu-Rin didn't even react to

that call, simply glaring at Hazeline and spitting out words filled with rage.

"....Oi." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Everyone present shivered at her tone, filled to the brim with killing intent.

"Look at me." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Hazeline weakly lifted her head up.

At the very moment her face was revealed, Kim Yu-Rin couldn't hold her anger back anymore.

She knew this wasn't the time nor the place. However, how could she hold back her rage when the very enemy who nearly ended her career as a Knight after destroying the paths of her Mana circulation, was right in front of her eyes?

Back then, Kim Yu-Rin definitely gave her a warning after chopping her arm off.

If she appeared once more before Kim Yu-Rin's eyes, then Yu-Rin wouldn't hesitate at all and cut off Hazeline's 'Mana' as well.

"I definitely told you back then, didn't I?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"I know, but... now isn't the right time for us to fight. We need your help so Mister Sae-Jin can be..." (Hazeline)

Even Hazeline's powerless answers sounded like f*cking excuses to Kim Yu-Rin's ears.

"Your dog's not right to fight, you..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin shouted out in anger and reached down towards her waist. However, the quick-on-the-uptake Yi Hye-Rin had already absconded with Gungnir and escaped far, far away by then. Still not giving up, Kim Yu-Rin pounced at Hazeline with her bare hands.

"No, don't you come here!! We shouldn't be doing... Euahahck!!!"

(Hazeline)

Kim Yu-Rin struck Hazeline's jaw with her fist, and swiftly climbed on top of the fallen Elf. Then, began raining down her fists on the helpless Hazeline's cheeks, nose, throat, collar bones, chest, pit of her stomach, and lower abdomen...

Suffering from earth-shaking pain that seemed to break her body into pieces, Hazeline reached out and reflexively grabbed Kim Yu-Rin's hair in a desperate attempt to save herself.

"Euh!! Let go, now!!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"We, we shouldn't be doing this!! Right now, Mister Sae-Jin is..." (Hazeline)

Hazeline looked deep into Kim Yu-Rin's eyes and pleaded with her.

Unfortunately, Kim Yu-Rin's anger soared even higher. Those eyes of Hazeline's that showed her worries were... exactly the same as the eyes looking at 'that guy' in the past.

"Again?! You, you, you crazy bi*ch!!!!!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Completely losing her sh*t now, Kim Yu-Rin screamed out the second-ever curse word she spat out in her entire life, and grasped Hazeline's hair. And soon enough, a sorry excuse of a tug-of-war unfolded in earnest.

"Ahahahahck!!!"

"Kkyahahck!!"

It was a fierce tug-of-war where no one could predict who might end up as a baldy first...

"Stop it, please!!"

"What is the matter with you two?! What are you all doing? Break them up!!"

Members of the raiding team rushed in towards the two

bickering females, but completely enraged Kim Yu-Rin shoved everyone away and grabbed another handful of Hazeline's hair.

"Hair, my hair's gonna fall out!! My hair!! Yu-Rin-ah!!! Unni's hair is gonna fall off!!" (Hazeline)

"Yu-Rin-ah?!?! Who does this crazy bi*ch think is talking to...?!" (Kim Yu-Rin) (TL: Just in case you don't know, -ah is a suffix in Korean that's attached at the end of a person's name. It usually means someone younger or a child, but can also be used between friends. It's similar to -chan or -kun in Japanese.)

Ttuk.

Suddenly, with a short sound of something being pulled out, Kim Yu-Rin and Hazeline got finally separated.

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" "
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There was a heavy silence permeating in the room.

Finally freed from Kim Yu-Rin's death-like grips, Hazeline felt around her head while moaning out in pain.

And having felt something was off, she quickly turned her head to look, and...

Within the hands of Kim Yu-Rin, who had fallen on the floor due to the momentum, she could see two clumps of blonde hair being tightly held.

One second, two, then three... Before long, thick tear drops began forming in the eyes of the totally-dumbfounded Hazeline.

"My, my hair, my hair... I told you, it might come loose, didn't I... SFX for a serious bout of uncontrolled sobbing"

The Guild 'The Monster' was currently showing remarkable results in the fields of defense industry, Monster subjugation,

artifacts, as well as pension investment schemes. Many people predicted that the Guild's sister company, 'TM', would enter the top 10 in the rankings of the worldwide corporations. And, after becoming a landmark of sorts in Korean peninsula, the piece of land in Gangwon Province where the Guild's and the company's buildings were located on, began generating millions in tourist revenue alone.

On top of this, they even succeeded in penetrating into the closed-off, secretive and snobbish world of Wizards. It was all due to the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong, who showed much favouritism towards The Monster. And the members-only library of The Monster where every grimoire published by the Bangbae-Dong Wizard was stored, even got voted as the number one library Wizards wished to visit.

Whatever the case may have been, an enormous Guild that had surpassed its supposed rival Trilogy a long time ago, was holding a party aboard a cruise liner.

The invitation card of this particular party, where the top performers of The Monster Entertainment, as well as famous Knights and the current members of the Guild were supposed to attend, had somehow became a barometer to determine the level of fame and influence a person of high standing possessed.

Those who didn't receive the invitation raged out in regret, while those who did, proudly readied their attires for the party.

"So, the plan is, we apprehend the Vampire Elder who will attend this party stealthily, yes?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

There was a certain calmness present within the conference room where the proverbial storm had swept past.

"Yes, that's correct..." (Yi Hye-Rin)

Yi Hye-Rin answered while continuously studying the mood.

She couldn't help but think about the sobbing Hazeline, busy

isolating herself in the corner of the room while trying to concoct a certain potion. It was probably to mend the... 'bald spots' on her head. Its possible name, 'Hair-Growth' potion; if she succeeds in inventing it, she may end up making a profit of ten billion dollars, easy.

"With that, we can find where Mister Sae-Jin is being held?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"There's no guarantee, but still, we should try everything we can..." (Yi Hye-Rin)

Suddenly, Kim Yu-Rin stood up. A small stuffed doll of an Orc hanging on the scabbard of her sword dangled along.

"Wha, what?! What are you going to do now?!" (Yi Hye-Rin)

Yi Hye-Rin, as well as other members, hastily got up as well. They were worried about her pouncing on Hazeline once more. Thankfully, other than shooting a sharp glare at the back of Hazeline, Kim Yu-Rin didn't act out as others had feared.

"....I'm done doing that, for now. I need to go back to my Order and report that I'm returning to active duty first. I got the okay for my vacation because of the post-op trauma, so if I attend a party like this, I will end up with a disciplinary action, you know." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Aha. In that case, let me go with you." (Yi Hye-Rin)

"By the way, Hazeline. Did you bring the potion to regenerate Rejen's arms already? Just how long must she remain without arms?" (Yu Baek-Song)

It was then, the slightly tactless Yu Baek-Song asked the back of spotted head belonging to Hazeline.

"No, it's okay, White Tiger-nim. I'll be fine even if it's later..." (Rejen)

The Soo-in Rejen lifted her upper torso from Yu Baek-Song's lap

where she had been laying down until now, and tried to take care of the Divine Beast's lack of respect towards good timing.

"Uh-huh. I'll take care of this so you keep resting." (Yu Baek-Song)

However, the desires of Yu Baek-Song to take good care of her fellow Soo-in was a truly touching thing, and also...

"....In my pouch." (Hazeline)

...Also, Hazeline muttered without even glancing back once.

The party above the cruise liner was scheduled to start at 8 in the evening, but the members had a need to prepare this and that beforehand, so they arrived three hours early. They then performed the final inspection of the torture chamber (?) hidden at the depths of the cruise ship.

"By the way, how did you explain this to Yu Sae-Jung?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"We sort of told her that he went on a business trip..." (Yi Hye-Rin)

At Yi Hye-Rin's reply, Kim Yu-Rin's brows narrowed.

"Seriously, you guys... Whew. When Sae-Jung arrives later today, you tell her the truth." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Eh? But, then she might end up worrying..." (Yi Hye-Rin)

"Of course she must worry. How can she be his girlfriend, if she doesn't even know anything at all?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

""

Yi Hye-Rin shut her mouth. Her lips itched to be opened, but she endured. If she could say this one thing, "But you're a Moh-Tae-Solo", then she would not have anything more to wish for, but it was prudent to keep her mouth shut. Definitely. (TL: Moh-Tae-

Solo – 모태솔로 The literal translation is "mother's womb, solo". It's a slang term for "someone who's never been in a romantic relationship in his or her entire life.")

"And, also...." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin took a glance at Hazeline's direction. Still stuck in some random corner, she was busy with creating the elusive hairgrowth potion. The sounds of mortar and pestle – tongtongtong – seemed rather sad and forlorn, for some reason.

Kim Yu-Rin returned her gaze back to Yi Hye-Rin. Famed for her quick wits, Yi Hye-Rin got her drift soon enough, and asked Hazeline instead of Kim Yu-Rin.

"Miss Hazeline, do you by any chance know a mental manipulation magic?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

"....A little bit." (Hazeline)

Hazeline's voice lacked energy, but that was fine. The effects of such magic was wholly dependent on the target's mental resistance. And something like that would be taken care of Kim Yu-Rin's fist, laden with her unique Trait.

"That's all solved, then." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Miss Sae-Jung has arrived!" (Kim Sun-Ho)

The door was shoved open abruptly, and Kim Sun-Ho entered while shouting out. The complexions of everyone present became rather clouded.

"Should I go?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin made a suggestion.

"I'll go with you."

"Let me come with you."

Joo Ji-Hyuk and Yi Hye-Rin spoke up at the same time. Kim Yu-

Rin assumed a wry smile.

Tongtongtongtong...

With the somewhat sad background noise of the mortar and pestle pounding away, three of them left the torture chamber.

Entering the deck of the cruise liner, Yu Sae-Jung smiled and greeted the trio of Kim Yu-Rin, Yi Hye-Rin and Joo Ji-Hyuk.

Initially, she complimented on the layout of the party itself, but then, after glossing over the pleasantries, got down to business and began asking for Sae-Jin's real whereabouts.

With a serious face, Kim Yu-Rin answered as truthfully as she could.

And everytime her lips moved, Yu Sae-Jung's complexion paled further and further.

In the middle of the explanation, she even shouted out "What are you talking about? Is there a candid camera thing going on here or something?" But when Kim Yu-Rin finally got to the part "Mister Sae-Jin has been kidnapped"...

Plop!!

Yu Sae-Jung lost her consciousness and crumpled to the floor like a blow-up doll that lost all its air.

< 42. Rescue (1) > Fin.

Chapter 143: Rescue (2)

"She fainted as soon as she heard the explanations?" (Yu Baek-Song)

Yu Baek-Song asked as she took a look at Yu Sae-Jung, currently lying on a bed and totally unconscious.

"Yes. I think the shock must have been too heavy... but none of us expected her to collapse like this, at all." (Yi Hye-Rin)

Yi Hye-Rin replied while touching Yu Sae-Jung's forehead. As if she was suffering from a nightmare, her forehead was soaked with cold sweat.

"What should we do now...?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

The very person who should have played the role of the host for the party in the missing Kim Sae-Jin's stead had now fainted. That was why they wanted to keep his kidnapping as a secret in the first place...

Thankfully, there was still a hour or so left until the start of the party, but then, would she wake up in time? And, even if she did wake up, could she be able to maintain a lucid state of mind...?

"There's nothing we can do, but to get Mister Sae-Jin back as soon as possible.Oi, Mister Vampire." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin's eyes gleamed sharply as she looked at Rhosrahdel.

"Y, yes?!" (Rhosrahdel)

"You sure your plan is going to work?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"O, of course! Judging by the fact that the Vampires under the Bathory's influence haven't yet issued a kill-on-sight order towards the Nosferatus, she must've not informed her subordinates yet, and thus I suspect that she is still stuck together with Mister Sae-Jin at this point in time. The plan will work 100%." (Rhosrahdel)

"....Wait. Isn't that strange? If she hasn't informed her lackeys

yet, then how can an Elder know Bathory's location?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"When someone gets to the level of an Elder, he must sign an oath of blood with Bathory, which means they can track her aura quite accurately. The reason why they aren't doing anything at the moment is because she gave them a strict order to stay put until she returns on her own volition." (Rhosrahdel)

Kim Yu-Rin rubbed her chin and fell into a train of thought.

"In that case, you can definitely tell the face of the Elder, right?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Of course. I've had plenty of experience, and also..." (Rhosrahdel)

Suddenly, Rhosrahdel rolled up his sleeve and pushed forward his arm. His skin was the typical Vampire-pale, seemingly bloodless one but when he concentrated, a rather pretty blue emblem rose up from it. It was the 'Magic Tattoo', the trademark belonging only to Kim Sae-Jin and what the world referred to as truly 'revolutionary'.

"Thanks to this, my senses have been greatly enhanced. No matter how well that Elder disguises his aura, I'll be able to detect him." (Rhosrahdel)

"....Good." (Kim Yu-Rin)

It sure didn't feel right to have a Vampire as a comrade, but it couldn't be helped under the current circumstances.

Kim Yu-Rin sent Rhosrahdel back up to the deck and approached Yu Sae-Jung. When she sat near the head of the bed, Hazeline who was sitting nearby trembled hard and, pababaht!! hurriedly retreated far away. Sighing out grandly, Kim Yu-Rin glared at her and spat out a couple of hostile words.

"Are you truly worried about her?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"...Wha, what are you talking about?" (Hazeline)

"Can't you figure out what I'm talking about?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin gritted her teeth. Hazeline returned the sharp glare for a bit of time, but then, backed off and powerlessly replied.

"It's true... I am worried for her..." (Hazeline)

And then, she picked up the mortar and pestle again.

Tongtongtong...

That was indeed a sad but desperate attempt to regrow hair back on the two spots on the crown of her head where it had been ripped out.

Yi Hye-Rin sent out gazes of pity towards Hazeline's direction, while Kim Yu-Rin didn't even spare a second of her time.

Another hour went by in this stifling silence.

Yu Sae-Jung didn't wake up. And the deck was getting noisier and noisier now.

"We need to go upstairs now. But to leave her alone here, is just..." (Yi Hye-Rin)

Yi Hye-Rin worriedly spoke.

"Then Hazeline, you guard her. After all, you can't go outside with your hair all falling out and stuff." (Yu Baek-Song)

Yu Baek-Song spoke innocently enough, but Kim Yu-Rin shook her head while forming a grave expression.

"We can't do that. That'll be like letting a cat guard fish." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"...And what's wrong with letting a cat do that?" (Yu Baek-Song)

Yu Baek-Song quickly glanced over at Kaiser the 2nd, lying inside a paper box. Seeing it yawn out in comfort, it seemed that the careless remarks didn't hurt the feline's feelings after all. Kim Yu-Rin looked at Yu Baek-Song with a somewhat flustered expression.

"No, well, it's not..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"I won't do something like that again." (Hazeline)

Hazeline, her back still turned towards them, spoke in a stiff but resolute voice as if to cut into the conversation.

"I've been regretting that for a long time." (Hazeline)

"What...?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"....I'm sorry. This Unni did something terribly wrong back then." (Hazeline)

Although it was a sudden apology, one could still sense her true feelings contained within. And so, Kim Yu-Rin found herself unable to say anything.

As she kept her mouth shut and fell into a deep dilemma on how to respond...

Tahng, tahng, tahng!

The fireworks indicating the start of the party could be heard.

Using that as the suitable excuse, Kim Yu-Rin and Yu Baek-Song as well as the others hurriedly went upstairs.

Only the most outstanding individuals came to attend this grand party. Korean superstars that transcended past the Korean-Chinese-Japanese borders, career politicians who have stepped into the centres of governing circles, many Order Masters and Vice Masters from overseas Knights Orders, and even several Tower Lords from those Wizard Towers famed for their snobbishness were here.

The 'main character' of this party hadn't arrived yet, but still, decked out in expensive and sophisticated party dresses, these

people were already participating neck-deep in this unmissable networking opportunity.

Joo Ji-Hyuk was the first to enter the party. As if the emblem of 'The Monster' mounted on his chest possessed the power to capture all the attention of the partygoers, people began gravitating towards him.

"Uh-huh-huh. Isn't this the representative of the Dawn Knights Order?"

A middle-aged politician named Yun Young-Ho, who was able to climb up to a position of importance within the 50-something age of his, engaged Joo Ji-Hyuk in conversation.

Now normally, this Yun Young-Ho character wouldn't even spare a second of his time with the likes of a Knight, unless he was facing a Master or a Vice Master of an Order. But, that golden badge on Joo Ji-Hyuk's chest was not something that could be seen commonly. As a matter of fact, if he could swap his ID card for the National Assembly with that golden emblem, he'd kowtow hundreds of times in a heartbeat.

"Ah, how have you been, Mister Assemblyman?" (Joo Ji-Hyuk)

"Hahaha. I've been very well, all thanks to your Guild."

"...Pardon?" (Joo Ji-Hyuk)

Joo Ji-Hyuk tilted his head. Did The Monster even enter the world of politics lately as well?

"Huhuh. Actually, it was I who actively pursued for the export of TM's potions worldwide, see. Thanks to that, even the local potion market has revived for good, and many flattering remarks from our international counterparts landed on our doorsteps as well. Which allowed me to get re-elected quite successfully..."

Now that Joo Ji-Hyuk heard the man's words, he seemed to be yet another one filled with self-praise. Joo Ji-Hyuk let the politician's words flow through one ear and leave through the

other one while he carefully surveyed the faces of the crowd.

"By the way, there is something I'm curious about. Does The Monster only pick its new members from the ranks of Knights and Wizards?"

"Ah..... Well, I don't think so. After all, isn't Instructor Yi Yu-Jin seeing a tremendous growth after becoming the Guild's member?" (Joo Ji-Hyuk)

"Oho, that is true! Hahaha, I've completely forgotten about that. I've heard that she has built ten-odd dojos for Jin Seh-Hahn's martial arts in the States already... Well, that is something, alright. Hahaha..."

Yun Young-Ho's eyes were shining brightly. They were the eyes of avarice, belonging to a person who had uncovered a possibility.

Whatever the case may have been, as the conversation continued, more and more people began crowding around Joo Ji-Hyuk.

"Ah, I've heard that the Guild Master, Mister Kim Sae-Jin, isn't going to attend this party... Is that true?"

"Eh? Oh, yes. I said he won't be able to come due to feeling a bit under the weather. Instead, we've arranged so you can enjoy the party stil..." (Joo Ji-Hyuk)

It was then, the voice of a bodyguard manning the entrance to the party venue entered Joo Ji-Hyuk's ear.

"Mister Kim Jong-Hyuk from the Great Wisdom Investments and his acquaintance, confirmed."

Joo Ji-Hyuk hurriedly shifted the direction of his gaze. Thankfully, both Kim Yu-Rin and Rhosrahdel were moving towards the entrance already.

By seeing the various changes to his surroundings, Sae-Jin could

estimate that he didn't have much time left.

First of all, the interior of this isolated space had definitely increased in size compared to two days ago. Initially, it was nothing more than a pitch-black empty space, it soon grew into a size of a hotel room and now, the entire area grew to a size of about half the floor of the said hotel.

Secondly, the frequency of Bathory using magic spells which she hadn't been using before, increased by a huge deal. Magic that cast restraints on targets, magic that cast shields on the caster, magic that even cast 'mirrors' within the space itself, etc, etc...

Of course, he could break them apart using the claws of the Wolf, but he couldn't help but get worried by the gradual increase in the sophistication of the spells being used here.

"Hng~ Hng~ Hng~~."

He could hear the humming of Bathory as she lay on a bed. Feeling annoyed all of a sudden, Sae-Jin slashed out with his claws. Bathory quickly performed a shield magic, but the incoming claws easily shattered the shield and poked a hole in her stomach.

"Eek!! That hurts!"

Unfortunately, Bathory issued a short cry only. As if she was controlling her emotions well, she didn't even lash out, either.

And that was the most glaring evidence of them all that said her body had recovered to a certain degree.

"Hey you. So, like, how come your attacks can slice through magic? It's so mystifying, you know?" (Bathory)

Hell, she was even throwing him a question. While pulling his claws out in the most relaxed manner he could muster, Sae-Jin replied.

"My claws are special." (Sae-Jin)

The claws of the Lycanthrope had almost reached the A level, so

they were not constrained by the form or nature of the target, and could cut into pretty much anything in this world. Although it wouldn't be easy, if Bathory wasn't here, Sae-Jin could break open this isolation barrier as well.

"Hmm..." (Bathory)

Bathory formed a grin filled with meanings as she nodded her head.

"Well, that's nice. It's a nice little ability... By the way, isn't it smart to give up 'round about now? If you do, I'll even spare your life and let you become my eternal slave." (Bathory)

Appearing right before Sae-Jin's eyes before he could even react, Bathory pompously asked him. The flawless beauty of Bathory didn't even have a single speck of embarrassment at this sudden close-up.

"I'm really interested in you, you know? Besides, keeping a being that was called our natural enemy around like a pet dog might be fun, too... And also, you agreed before, right? That our plans will succeed." (Bathory)

Bathory was in the midst of recovering all her powers. And, if no relief pitcher showed up within the next couple of innings, then this game was as good as over. So, under that kind of situation, her suggestion of not killing the Wolf that repeatedly injured her, could be seen as rather benevolent of her.

Too bad, the Wolf's instincts much preferred freedom over servitude, and 'self-indulgence' way over even freedom itself.

"Yeah, that's right. I think you'll succeed in your plans. I got this hazy feeling about that... However, isn't that going to be an even bigger problem for you?" (Sae-Jin)

"...And what the hell are you talking about?" (Bathory)

Bathory's brows furrowed. Kim Sae-Jin smirked and continued with his words.

"You are trying to twist the fabric of space and time to return to the 'past' version of your 'homeworld', am I right?" (Sae-Jin)

".....Right."

"However, by any chance, what happens if only one of that succeeds? To be more precise, what if there is no change in the timeline, but you still jump between the dimensions?" (Sae-Jin)

""

Almost immediately, Bathory's face became terrifying. However, since she had such a needlessly beautiful face to begin with, her expression wasn't that scary no matter how angry she appeared so.

"And your original world, the situation there is so bad that every living thing in that place just had to move to another world, am I right?" (Sae-Jin)

Reddish Mana filled with hostility oozed out from her, and veins in her forehead bulged and wiggled.

"So, what happens when you fail to return to the past and end up in the original world of present? Just what would be waiting for you back there? I don't know much, but I'm sure you know the answer very well already." (Sae-Jin)

Most likely, a being countless times more dangerous than the most dangerous beings found on this planet would be waiting for the Vampires' arrival.

"If that happens, then it's mutual destruction, isn't it. When the Fissure completely opens up, the earth will be destroyed, and you who went back home will all die too, you morons." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin sneered at the scene that brushed past his consciousness back then – before sensing a pressure around his neck that was on another level altogether. When he looked down, both hands of Bathory were busy clasping his throat tightly in anger.

"Fuhut. Stop with your unlucky ramblings, okay? You're making

me rescind my final bit of benevolence, you know... You sh*tty piece of mongrel." (Bathory)

Bathory smiled as she spoke. Sae-Jin followed her and also formed a thick smile. Fangs of these two people glistened under the light.

Sae-Jin then savagely grabbed the back of her neck, and viciously bit into that smooth and fine neck with vengeance.

Meanwhile, Bathory shoved her hand to his side and began destroying his bones.

And so, while blood overflowed everywhere, the bodies of two people piled up on top of the bed together. (TL: WTF? That is.... uh, weirdly romantic?! Don't tell me...)

[Bathory's blood has been absorbed! Both the Degrees of Progression and Advancement increases.]

[Bathory's blood has been absorbed! Both the Degrees of Progression and Advancement increases.]

[Bathory's blood has been absorbed! Both the Degrees of Progression and Advancement increases....

The pain was indescribable, but he was still feeling rather good regardless. His provocation was a success, which meant her recovery would be delayed by a few more days, while several satisfactory alert windows continued to pop up as well.

But he had to be careful here.

After all, Vampires would be the most sensitive beings in this world when it came to sucking on another's blood. Carefully, carefully; slowly, slowly – he should cautiously suck on this juicy pile of experience points...

< 42. Rescue (2) > Fin.

Chapter 144: Rescue (3)

Kim Jong-Hyuk entered the party venue with a handsome and tall foreigner in tow.

"Hmph... It's not too shabby, I suppose."

Kim Jong-Hyuk sneered as he took in the surroundings. Beautiful actresses and female Knights were everywhere. Although he didn't come here for that, it did seem a bit like a wasted opportunity to not have his ways with all these women.

No, actually, the feeling of righteous anger was stronger than that of regret over missed chances. The b*stards who snorted in disdain when he called out to them, were now busy wagging their tails right now.

"Mister Trudeau?"

Kim Jong-Hyuk turned around to look at 'Trudeau' with courteous eyes. The foreigner narrowed his brows a little, but he still nodded his head once.

"Three's the limit. And Knights with strong resistance are a no."

"Hahaha. That's going to be enough." (Kim Jong-Hyuk)

As soon as Trudeau's permission was given, Kim Jong-Hyuk extracted a ring from his inner pocket. There was a strange and blood-coloured gem stuck in the middle.

"Hehehe..."

Just as Kim Jong-Hyuk grinned an evil grin and was about to jump into the middle of the attractive actresses...

"Huh? Aren't you Mister Kim Jong-Hyuk? This is a pleasant surprise."

The High Tier Knight affiliated with the Raven Order and the member of The Monster Guild, Yi Hye-Rin approached him. And Kim Yu-Rin was following her as well. Two of them kitted out in eye-catching dresses were as beautiful as Elves, so the overtly licentious Kim Jong-Hyuk had to stop everything he was doing and take a large gulp of saliva instead.

".....Ahahaha. Well, look who it is. I just ran into the real VIPs here. It's my pleasure." (Kim Jong-Hyuk)

"Fuhut, we are not VIPs at all. Isn't that what we are supposed to say? By the way, who is this gentleman next to you?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

The moment Yi Hye-Rin smiled and spoke, a voice seemingly seeped into her mind.

- It's the Elder.

It was a telepathy from Rhosrahdel.

"He is the current Vice President of the firm 'Rolaina Intrude'. They are an international investment firm, so I'm not sure if lady Knights have heard of them..." (Kim Jong-Hyuk) (TL: Well, this author and his terrible naming sense strikes again... I did my best to romanise "롤레이나 인트루드" but man, it sounds like a variant of some exotic milkshake, doesn't it...)

"Of course, we've heard of them. This must be some type of a fated encounter, so how about we share a drink or two?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

While smiling with her eyes, Yi Hye-Rin checked for Kim Yu-Rin's reaction. Oho? Captain acting out in that bashful expression is really amazing?!

"Looks like Captain here is okay with that as well?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

"....Well, if you guys want it, then. Hahaha." (Kim Jong-Hyuk)

Kim Jong-Hyuk guffawed and eyed Trudeau. His eyes arrogantly said, 'See? I'm a man of this much status.'

"...Hmm."

Trudeau thought about this for a moment. Even if it was the Elder-level charm magic, against high Tiered Knights, there was a

big possibility of it failing to stick.

However, hidden within the trouser pockets of Kim Jong-Hyuk was the highest grade 'aphrodisiac.'

Concocted with the utmost care by the Vampires, this aphrodisiac should prove effective even against high Tiered Knights, and when alcohol was added in the mix as well, then the odds wouldn't be bad at all.

"....I'm fine with that." (Trudeau)

Trudeau assumed a thick smile and looked at the two Knights.

"In that case, should we head to a guest room below deck? I don't enjoy all this hustle and bustle, actually." (Yi Hye-Rin)

"Well, that's great. Lead the way." (Kim Jong-Hyuk)

Four of them formed a group and climbed down the stairs of the ship, and at the same time, another Vampire trailed them from behind, his presence nearly undetectable.

SFX for footsteps.

And as he walked down the steps, Trudeau suddenly had a strange yet foreboding feeling coming over him.

It wasn't solely because no matter how much he walked, the bottom of the stairs couldn't be seen. There was also a faint but familiar presence coming from behind him...

When Trudeau turned around to look, the world seemed to darken all of a sudden.

"W, what?!"

As Kim Jong-Hyuk panicked grandly and looked around, a blunt scabbard of a sword was swung his way.

Khong!

A completely useless third wheel was soon knocked out with a well-placed smack to the middle of his forehead.

'It's a trap!'

Trudeau hurriedly tried to activate teleportation, but the golden sword light pouring out from Kim Yu-Rin sliced off his right arm before that.

"Kkheuahahahck!!"

With the arm needed to complete the technique gone, the teleportation got cancelled immediately. Trudeau panicked and tried to form 'Venom Spear' with his remaining arm instead.

Almost right away, from his back, dozens, hundreds of black spears materialised in the air.

Each of these spears were manifestations of a powerful venom, so these human scums would be grievously wounded even with the slightest touch...

It was definitely a high-grade spell, but unfortunately for him, the compatibility was poor – Yi Hye-Rin's sword could distort the space itself and slice apart magic, after all.

SFX for air being split

The sword swung by Yi Hye-Rin deflected one spear away, and then, began bending in a weird way to rapidly destroy all the other spears.

The pitiful Trudeau didn't even have time to panic at all – because, at that moment, Kim Yu-Rin's Gungnir had cut off his other arm...

"Keu-ah..."

Kim Yu-Rin set about the 'purpose' of her Trait as 'mute', so he couldn't even scream in pain anymore. Losing both of his arms, he ended up kneeling down on the floor.

""

The isolation barrier was cancelled by then, and Trudeau could spot the despicable traitor busy loitering about past the shoulders of the female Knights.

'Do you not fear the wrath of the Lord?!' (Trudeau)

He wanted to scream out, but his voice didn't want to come out. However, Trudeau didn't give up and forcefully pushed his vocal chords as hard as he could – until he sensed a strange voice buzzing around near his brain.

- Let's be honest, Mister Elder, you also have been suspecting it for a while, haven't you? That our plan has a higher chance of failing altogether. I merely chose a path of survival for myself. (Rhosrahdel)

It was a telepathy sent from Rhosrahdel. Trudeau hurriedly sent back furious swearings and angry shouts, but by then, the younger Vampire had firmly shut the communication off.

Now that he was completely trapped, Trudeau's face reddened even more, and as he struggled uselessly, blood poured out like waterfall from where his arms used to be. Although his consciousness got blurred from all that blood loss, Trudeau still glared at Rhosrahdel with bloodshot eyes.

Too bad for him, all those fury, cursings, and hatred that went unheard now, would remain unheard forever.

For how long had she been swimming in the pit of meaningless abyss?

"Let's get married."

She suddenly recalled a man who said the words she wanted to hear so much in a slurred speech. Right away, Yu Sae-Jung's eyes snapped open.

Tongtongtong...

The first thing she heard was the sound of a pestle pounding on a mortar, and soon afterwards, her heart began to burn hotly. Even

tears began to well up. Yu Sae-Jung tried to get up hastily but her feet got tangled up and, Kwadangtang!! fell flat on the floor.

"...Mommy!?!?" (Hazeline)

The sound of mortar and pestle came to a halt, and the woman who had been using them turned to look at her.

"...Unni?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Sae, Sae-Jung, you are awake." (Hazeline)

Hazeline put the pestle down and approached Yu Sae-Jung to help her stand up.

"Are you alright? You should still rest..." (Hazeline)

"Let me go!" (Yu Sae-Jung)

However, Yu Sae-Jung coldly pushed the helping hands away. She suddenly felt wronged and furious. She was Kim Sae-Jin's girlfriend. They even promised to get married. So why was she the very last person to be informed about his kidnapping?

"Sa, Sae-Jung-ah?! Please, calm down first, and..." (Hazeline)

"How can I calm down in this situation?! Oppa has been kidnapped! But besides that, where is everyone else? Call them over here right now!!" (Yu Sae-Jung)

She gritted her teeth as Mana began boiling above her skin. Definitely a bad sign, that was the first indication of the condition, 'Mana Deviation'. It was one of the most fatal conditions for either Knights and Wizards, where Mana went out of control, resulting in all the accumulated Mana leaking out and their lives being placed in mortal danger.

Hazeline's brows narrowed to a slit.

"Sae-Jung, you need to calm down. You being like this isn't going to help anyone, you know?" (Hazeline)

"Help anyone, my a*s! You all knew already, so why?! Why didn't

you tell me before?!" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Because, we thought you might get too worried..." (Hazeline)

"Worries? Of course I would worry!! Get outta my way!" (Yu Sae-Jung)

Yu Sae-Jung pulled herself up and staggered towards the exit of the room. Hazeline sighed out and in the end, pulled out a bottle of potion from her inner robe pocket.

It was the sleeping potion.

After popping open the lid, she poured it over Yu Sae-Jung who couldn't even walk properly but was behaving rather recklessly.

"Ah-ahck!! Hey!! What are you doin..."

Hazeline was sure of hearing an unpleasant form of informal speech, but whatever – Yu Sae-Jung powerlessly slid down to the floor.

And almost right away, the door to the room was pushed open. And it was the members of the rescue team, accompanying a Vampire that could be the Elder.

They were rushing inside but after discovering the situation, stopped in their tracks.

Yu Sae-Jung, who was on the ground after suffering the effects of an unknown potion, while there was Hazeline, holding a potion bottle.

Kim Yu-Rin's hand slowly reached down to her hips, towards her sword.

"....I just put her to sleep because she was rampaging around. Please, don't doubt me on this one. Yu-Rin? Please let go of your weapon. Let go. I'll really die with that. Like, really die. Really." (Hazeline)

Persuading the Elder was quite easy. After pounding on the Elder's face with Kim Yu-Rin's fists loaded with the purpose of 'shearing away bits of mental resistance with every punch landed', the Elder's mind finally became soft as mush, and using that opening, Hazeline's mind manipulation magic dealt the final critical blow.

And so, they had succeeded in turning this Elder into a puppet, but...

"So, what should we do about this guy?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

Yi Hye-Rin pointed to the additional guest of this mess, Kim Jong-Hyuk, and asked.

"Oi, Bob Ross, can you make so that he will forget about today's matters?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Of course."

At Kim Yu-Rin's demand, Rhosrahdel stepped forward smartly and began pouring his Mana into Kim Jong-Hyuk's brain.

"It's all done. He will remember it as having had a blackout after drinking himself into a stupor." (Rhosrahdel)

"That's a relief. Well done, Bob Ross." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"....By the way, just who is a Bob Ross? I'm Rhosrahdel."

She lightly ignored 'Bob Ross' and his complaints and instead, Kim Yu-Rin took a slight glance at Yu Sae-Jung lying on the bed.

"What time did the butler from the Dawn household say he'll be here?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"He said soon."

Kim Yu-Rin nodded her head with a complicated expression on her face. It was regrettable, but Yu Sae-Jung's mental state would only be a hindrance to them. On top of that, according to Hazeline's words, she even exhibited signs of 'Mana Deviation', too... "Alright, then. Is everyone ready? If you wish to be forgiven by Yu Sae-Jung, you need to bring the Guild Master Kim Sae-Jin home no matter what!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Yes, ma'am. We will!"

Everyone energetically spat out the same answer.

SFX for the engine roaring

Driving on a precipitous mountain road was a wide-bodied SUV packed to the brim with eight people inside.

Kim Yu-Rin's driving was top-notch, but at the same time, it was also quite rough as well, so the passengers all looked to be in some serious discomfort. Especially so for Yu Baek-Song, who just so happened to possess keener senses than regular humans; with a face of someone literally dying, she was in the middle of busy harming herself, such as hitting her head repeatedly against the back of the middle row of passenger seats.

"It's the East Sea in this direction. Is this place correct?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Yes. Just a little bit further..."

Trudeau replied with a dazed face.

"Straight ahead?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Yes...."

"Okay." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Even though they were on the unpaved road, she still stepped hard on the accelerator. And because this, but interior of the car began shaking madly as if an earthquake had broken out or something.

"Wait, wait, I might... really throw up... at this rate..." (Yu Baek-Song)

Not too long after, Yu Baek-Song's powerless voice came from the furthest seats at the back.

"Huh?! No, you can't! You can't, you must not throw up in here!! I telling you right now, you must not throw up, got that?!" (Hazeline)

And the person raving madly was Hazeline, seating right next to her.

"No, no, I can't hold back anymore, you know?! I can't endure it no more. I might really die at this rate. No, I am already dead. Dead. Just treat me like a dead person." (Yu Baek-Song)

"Endure it.! I'm telling you to endure. Seriously, I'm telling y..." (Hazeline)

"Bleeeeergghhh!!"

"Kkyahahahahak!!!!" (Hazeline)

Chaos was unfolding at the rearmost set of seats, but Kim Yu-Rin didn't stop the car. No, instead of stopping, she actually increased the speed after her urgent need to rescue Kim Sae-Jin and the excitement at being given the opportunity to drive offroad real fast after long while, ended up overlapping.

"Argh, Mister Sae-Jin gave this robe to me as a present, you know!! Your sh*t is all over it now, you stupid cat!!" (Hazeline)

".....Bleurghhhhh."

"Sh*t... Heup! Stop! Stop the car, Yu-Rin. Yu-Rin!! Stop!! I'm also gonna throw up... Woo-eup!! Blergh!!"

"...Mister Bob Ross? Please deploy a shield around the rearmost seats. The smell may come over to this side." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"I've already deployed one a while ago, so you don't have to worry, ma'am. And I said, I'm not Bob Ross." (Rhosrahdel)

Yi Hye-Rin, Kim Sun-Ho, and Joo Ji-Hyuk let out sighs of relief. They decided to leave the matters of the rearmost seats to the After 40 minutes of torturous driving later, the group finally arrived at the place the Vampire Elder had lead them to. And well, it was indeed an area so secluded and lonely, they never could have guessed such a place even existed before.

"Well, there aren't anyone with problems, right?" Asked Kim Yu-Rin.

If one thought of Hazeline and Yu Baek-Song who were mired in the sick of each other as "problems", they were indeed problematic, but Rhosrahdel's cleaning magic spell managed to completely wash both of them, well, clean.

"Since you knew a magic like this, you really should've used this spell sooner... Really, I don't like you at all." (Hazeline)

"There it is. Wow, as expected of Bathory. Look how sturdy the isolation barrier is." (Rhosrahdel)

Lightly ignoring the grumblings of Hazeline, Rhosrahdel pointed at the dome-shaped jet-black barrier at the distance.

"What should we do now, Captain?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

"I should be able to destroy the barrier with my Gungnir. But the problem is what comes next. How should we deal with Bathory?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"...Hmm. How about this method?" (Kim Sun-Ho)

Kim Sun-Ho raised his hand.

"What is it?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"TM has been in charge of defense against the Monster threats, so... They have come up with many innovative items such as unmanned arbalests and gun turrets." (Kim Sun-Ho) (ED: For people who don't know what an arbalest is, just imagine Van-Helsing hunting vampires with that crossbow. That crossbow is an

arbalest.)

".....Ah?!"

Kim Yu-Rin's eyes widened in an instant, but soon, she slowly shook her head.

"We don't have the time. We need to rescue the Guild Master before something happens to him." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"We can deploy the Mercenaries from the Company, so within half a day – no, less than one hour will be enough." (Kim Sun-Ho)

""

Kim Yu-Rin studied the reactions of her comrades. Yi Hye-Rin thought this was a good idea, so she readily agreed to it and even added in her own thoughts.

"Hazeline Unni, you can still do that thing, right? The magic that eliminates Mana." (Yi Hye-Rin)

"Uh? Uh, uh... But, I think ten seconds will be the l, limit, most likely."

Being called 'Unni' out of the blue, Hazeline got bewildered slightly and stuttered with her speech.

".....Whew. Then, we'll call the Mercenary Company to install those. Mister Sun-Ho?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

In any case, Bathory's aim was to tame the Azure Dragon. So, at minimum, it was guaranteed that she wouldn't kill him, and even Kim Sae-Jin himself wouldn't want to see his fellow Guild members sacrificing themselves either.

"Let's exclude the gun turrets and go with the arbalests. The Guild Master might end up getting mixed up in the attack." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Yes ma'am, understood." (Kim Sun-Ho)

Kim Sun-Ho hurriedly made a call to someone.

And less than 30 minutes later...

SFX for the rotors of helicopters spinning

Twelve helicopters covered up the entire night sky, and dozens of Mercenaries descended from them while carrying all the necessary gears.

"...Wow. What the hell. So fast."

Under the admiration of the rescue team, the Mercenaries managed to install tens of the unmanned arbalests in less than 20 minutes.

"What did you tell them?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"I explained that we have trapped a powerful Monster within the barrier." (Kim Sun-Ho)

"That's fine. Tell them to leave the area now." (Kim Yu-Rin)

In the end, unless the real 'elites' were involved, Bathory couldn't be taken down. Of course, the Mercenaries from the Monster were well known for their competence, but it was the right thing to avoid meaningless death at all times.

"Understood."

Kim Sun-Ho ordered them to return while clapping his hands; the Mercenaries retreated as swiftly as a fired arrow.

< 42. Rescue (3) > Fin.

Chapter 145: Rescue (4)

It was unknown how much time had passed by. However, he knew for sure that the inner area of the isolated space had grown as big as an elementary school playground.

It indeed seemed like a hopeless situation, but there was also something else to console Sae-Jin as well.

As he continued to tussle and fight with Bathory, the 'Degree of Advancement for structure of the muscles and bone density' continued to increase and increase until finally, the alert window that said [Muscles have been strengthened, and the bones have been fortified] accompanied the 100% completion for the Advancement.

The improvement was quite easy to see for himself. Not only the pain he felt after getting kicked and punched by the annoyed Bathory decreased noticeably, it was now possible to contend against her physically to a certain degree. Of course, he was still helpless against her magic attacks, though.

On the other side, Bathory was finding it quite suspicious regarding Sae-Jin's sudden increase in his overall sturdiness. But she let go of her suspicions pretty quickly after he came up with an excuse of "I've become used to your violent assaults, that's all."

Whatever – he still got to completely assimilate the 'physical essence' of Bathory for himself, and the next thing he started absorbing was [the knowledge of sorcery accumulated for the past 300 years.]

He initially hoped for the Skill where he could morph his entire body into pure vapours of Mana, but still, this was none other than the 'sorcery' – something that was commonly believed to be one level superior to regular magic. As the Leviathan, a being of Mana, he would be able to wield sorcery far more effectively than Bathory ever will.

And right now – the Degree of Advancement for sorcery was at 15%.

"Heu-hng, it's all done~." (Bathory)

And so, as he was trying to piece together 15% worth of fragmented knowledge of the sorcery in his head, Bathory's rather pleased chuckles could be heard out of the blue.

He sent a curious gaze towards her way. There was no need for him to say anything, really – she should start grumbling all on her own, anyway.

"Fuhut." (Bathory)

But for this time around, Bathory's explanations weren't strictly necessary.

There was a paper castle stacked up with playing cards in front of her. Bathory had built this 50 centimetre-tall stack with the method Sae-Jin taught her, and it was quite apparent that she was very pleased with herself.

Feeling rather cantankerous for some reason, Sae-Jin blew with his mouth. The paper castle trembled pitifully before it collapsed, and Bathory's face crumpled along as well.

"What the hell are you doing?!" (Bathory)

"Is it fun? Shouldn't have taught you that." (Sae-Jin)

"Really now, acting exactly like a man who is about to die, your temper is so rotten... But, besides all that, hey you. Don't you wanna play a round of cards with me again?" (Bathory)

The card game Bathory was referring to was 'One-card'. He played it with her before after seeing how bored she looked but now, she was bothering him over 18 times a day about playing it with her. Of course, when talking about a day, it was in terms of the flow of time within this isolated space. Although, it was not known how many days it would be outside for one day spent

inside. (TL: "One-card" is a type of card game played mostly in South Korea. I've never heard of it, but there's a page for it in Wikipedia.)

"Don't want to." (Sae-Jin)

"...How ridiculous. It was you who wanted to play it before. Is it because you lost to me all the time?" (Bathory)

"You are welcome to believe that if you want." (Sae-Jin)

In front of the complaining Bathory, the ace that used to occupy the top spot of the now-collapsed paper castle floated down quite lazily.

He looked at that innocuous occurrence without thinking too much when, quite suddenly, a single wisp of electricity buzzed past his brain cells. A feeling of a chill going down his spine – the Lycanthrope's intuition was acting up. No, it wasn't as if he had another peek at the future. Just that, a certain suspicion brushed past his brain like a flash of light, that was all.

"....Oii." (Sae-Jin)

"What?" (Bathory)

She replied while gathering the deck of cards. Since she sounded grumpy, Sae-Jin had to think for a bit. What he was about to say was going to be seen as far greater misconduct than blowing off her paper castle, after all.

"What is it? Speak up, will you. You're going to die soon anyways, so why are you being hesitant?" (Bathory)

"Fut."

He ended up chuckling after hearing her words. Although it was her own arrogant desire of not wanting to breathe in same air as humans, she apparently lived all her life stuck in a castle somewhere, and well, she was certainly full of curiosity as a result. And if she was so inquisitive, then that also meant she would be

full of questions as well.

In that case, she would have no choice but to admit to the words others might think of as nothing more than an attempt to sour the relationship.

"Well, it's nothing. Just asking because I'm curious. Your 'plan', did your Lord declare it will definitely succeed?" (Sae-Jin)

When he cautiously tested the waters, Bathory proudly nodded her head.

"That's right. Our Lord can see everything, you see? Although, he is old now and he has to sleep a lot nowadays." (Bathory)

"Hmph. So, that guy must be thinking that both the time and space can be distorted at the 'same' time?" (Sae-Jin)

Bathory's brows narrowed.

"That's right. Both at the same time. Hey, what are you trying to say here? Stop beating around the bush!" (Bathory)

"No, see. I'm just curious. That doesn't make sense, though. You ever heard of the term 'contradiction'?"

Bathory didn't know, but still nodded her head in an oblique angle as if she knew it already.

"...I'll explain that later. Whatever, what you Vampires want is to reverse the timeline and jump across space all at once. Time, and space... Just which one needs to proceed first in order for the plan to succeed?"

"....What rubbish are you spewing this time? You really a mongrel. You even bark like one when you talk." (Bathory)

As expected, her expressions were sullen. No, actually, it seemed like she had no idea what he was talking about in the first place.

"Well now, think about this carefully. If the timeline was reversed first, then there won't be any Fissure in your new time period, so how will you jump across the dimensions? And also, if you jump through the dimensions first, then the new dimension won't have the Fissure there, so how will you reverse the timeline?" (Sae-Jin)

Looking at the plan with a critical eye, influencing both the time and space simultaneously was impossible. No matter what, the difference of a single microsecond should always exist.

That was why, their plan definitely had a contradiction to it. It wasn't a particularly hard to understand this problem; even a layman would realise this issue eventually, given enough time.

In other words, Vampires would've caught onto this contradiction pretty easily as well – only if it wasn't for the presence of someone who could block any and all suspicions... the Vampire Lord, a figure who demanded blind, unquestioning and absolute loyalty from his subjects.

"Well, to me... No matter how hard I think about it, it feels like your Lord is using you." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin said this only one line, but the thick killing intent and heavy pressure were quickly added to the atmosphere. However, after fully assimilating Bathory's constitution, such physical threats were as good as non-existent to him now.

"....Hey, maybe you don't want to die after all? How about living the rest of your miserable life being ripped to shreds by other Monsters?" (Bathory)

Her voice was tinged in pure rage. But still, within her quietly-trembling eyes, a type of restlessness that couldn't be hidden away could also be felt.

"Besides, there is no need for the Lord to something like that." (Bathory)

"So, here's the thing. You all want to return to your original world, right? But your Lord probably doesn't. Most likely, he already knows it's impossible to return to the past version of your

home world." (Sae-Jin)

""

"Even I think it's definitely possible to overturn either the timeline or dimensions, sure. But that's only when you choose one or the other – the time, or the space. So, in other words, maybe the Lord is planning to drop you off at your home world like a bad habit, while himself alone – or maybe, with those goons loyal only to him, return to the past version of the earth~~, so he can swallow up the defenseless version of this planet for himself." (Sae-Jin)

"You shut your d**n mouth!!" (Bathory)

As soon as he finished speaking, Bathory pounced on him while growling wildly. Unlike the other times, though, her movement was urgent and lacked that certain elegance she possessed. Was that the clear evidence of her being restless?

Sae-Jin pushed her face away with both of his hands and continued on with his words.

"I heard Rhosrahdel call you as the future leader of the Vampires. But here's something else – you think the Lord will accept that? Vampires are a bunch of ambitions and desires rolled into one. I mean, doesn't the ones with nobler than noblest bloodlines have stronger obsession towards power and prestige?" (Sae-Jin)

"Kobhack!! The Lord has already said, he will choose the replacement for his aging self..." (Bathory)

"Well, that is, who would like it when he says he will rule over you lot for hundreds, maybe thousands of years into the future? Doesn't matter how well the Lord controls Vampire's instincts to drink blood by using whatever special artifact, he will get his a*s assassinated long before that. Besides, after he hands over the position, what would happen if one of you cause a revolt or something?" (Sae-Jin)

Calming down his shaking heart, Sae-Jin did his best to form a

sneer.

"Oh, by the way, is it really true that the Lord sleeps a lot? From what I've heard, doesn't he have, like, 100 more years left in his lifespan?" (Sae-Jin)

It was then, Bathory's Mana began rising up like a dragon ascending to heavens. The blood-coloured Mana boiling spectacularly on her skin showed off how violent her fury was this time around.

"Our Lord isn't that kind of a person." (Bathory)

Sae-Jin smiled and added the final words, "Oh, is he really?"

Maybe that crossed her bottom line, since she pounced on him as if she was planning to dissect him right there and then. He sank his fangs on her shoulders and desperately held on. Soon after, he was greeted by the type of pain where it felt like his organs were being pulled out one by one and his spine was being smashed into pieces.

And after some time had passed by...

Bathory abruptly stopped what she was doing.

SFX for sucking noises

"....What the?! You stupid mosquito!!" (Bathory)

She angrily pushed Sae-Jin off her as he continued to suck on her blood.

As he was lamenting on the fact that the Degree of Advancement was still only at 30%...

Suddenly, the cracks began forming on the walls of the isolation barrier.

"Oh? Looks like the rescue party has arrived." (Sae-Jin)

A smile automatically formed on his lips. He retracted the fur covering his body – he changed back to the human's appearance. Bathory stared at him with an unreadable expression, before her

lips twisted upwards.

"Really? In that case... I should kill them all, then." (Bathory)

When the golden sword light cut into the wall of the barrier, a rift ripped open on the part of the jet-black dome that didn't look like it'd break no matter what. And three seconds later, with a loud ripping noise, the rift appearing on one side spread out to the rest of the dome, and the whole thing shattered and fell apart like falling pieces of glass.

"We did it!!"

"Mister Sae-Jin!!"

There were two people within the isolated space.

As expected, they were Bathory woman and Kim Sae-Jin.

However, their positions were a bit strange. Sae-Jin was lying on the ground, while Bathory was straddling him on top. It was somewhat suggestive, and also was a position of dominance...

"That, that crazy bi*ch is!!" (Hazeline)

Seeing this scene, Hazeline screamed out even before she had the chance to think.

"What did you say?" (Bathory)

Hearing that uncalled-for name-calling, Bathory's face crumpled to resemble a demon. Then, Mana began to pour out from her body.

But, it was right at this moment when Hazeline's 'Mana suppression' activated. By sacrificing every single Mana Stone of Monsters taken from The Monster's warehouse, they succeeded in suppressing Bathory's Mana.

"These d**n mongrels...Kkheuck!!" (Bathory)

After the usage of Mana was forcibly taken away from her,

hundreds of arbalests fired their load at Bathory.

Horrifying noises of flesh being blown away resounded out, and countless sharp bolts fired off from the arbalests turned Bathory into a hedgehog in the blink of an eye.

But everyone knew this wasn't going to be enough. Yi Hye-Rin's whip sword, Joo Ji-Hyuk's greatsword, the front claws of the White Tiger, and Kim Yu-Rin's Gungnir descended down on Bathory's figure at the same time.

"Sh*t..." (Bathory)

They had more bodies than her. And she also had only one more life remaining.

Bathory had to swallow her humiliation and send a rescue signal to her lackeys.

Kwaaaahang!!

Countless sword auras rushed in like a storm of thunderbolts. Still, Bathory endured and avoided some of them. No need for c**p like Mana, just with her physical body only.

She barely managed to dodge the golden sword aura rushing towards her heart. She then grabbed the curvy sword that drew a strange arc and brushed past her throat, throwing it down to the ground. And the Knight holding that whip-like sword, Yi Hye-Rin, accompanied her weapon and slammed into the ground as well.

"Kkeuahck!!"

"Hye-Rin!! Are you alri...." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Next, Bathory dashed towards the female Knight relaxedly worrying about her comrade and punched her gut.

The female Knight commendably endured against Bathory's physical power, but still, a fair amount of blood gushed out from her mouth. Bathory pounced on Kim Yu-Rin in order to finish her off, while Joo Ji-Hyuk and Yu Baek-Song stepped forward to block

her...

Seeing this battle unfold, Sae-Jin intuitively knew they would lose.

Hazeline's efforts in Mana suppression was at its limit, and her Mana reserve was simply too empty to fire off any sort of offensive magic spells. On top of this, Bathory's reinforcements should be arriving any time now.

In other words, 'retreat' was the correct answer here.

But, what about the method? Using 'speed' to evade Bathory and escape was simply a crazy wish. She was fully capable of a crazy turn of speed where she could easily exceed the speed of sound and travel over a kilometre in one second.

So, he need to think of a means to escape. Think.

He abruptly recalled the part of a certain sorcery, so he hurriedly began to dive into the accumulated knowledge he stole and stored deep within his mind.

When he searched, he found one.

'The instant transmission.'

It was the sorcery Bathory used to kidnap him back then.

Kwaaahang!!

At the same time, Kim Yu-Rin's Gungnir collided with Bathory's bare fist and a huge wall of dust cloud exploded upwards. And within this cloud where one's view was obscured, Sae-Jin identified the locations of his comrades and summoned forth his Mana in order to compose the 'sorcery'.

As expected – the Leviathan's ability to integrate and wield Mana was simply beyond the capabilities of other species.

"...What?!" (Bathory)

Bathory sensed something was amiss, and quickly began to get

rid of the dust cloud. But, as she did so, blue Mana mushroomed up and surrounded Kim Sae-Jin's comrades, and...

Poof!

...They all vanished into thin air.

"Where?! Wha, what the hell?" (Bathory)

Bathory ended up punching the empty air quite unexpectedly, and as a result, she was left utterly confused – initially, at least.

"What the hell is this? Where did you run off to?!! Where the hell are you, you scummy mongrel sons of bi*ches!!! Aahahahahck!!!" (Bathory)

Then, she exploded in pure rage. Did Kim Yu-Rin succeed in landing a blow to her face? Bathory's swollen cheek seemed to further enhance the awful and ugly atmosphere.

"...My, my queen!!"

"Ha-ah, ha-ah... Hey, you b*stards, why are you so bloody late?!" (Bathory)

"My, my apologies!! Should we chase after them? We have detected the flow of their Mana!!"

Elders and Apostles hurriedly appeared and knelt down before her.

Bathory wiped away the blood from her lips and tidied up her messy hair while cold words of fury exploded out from her mouth.

"No. I'm more or less calm now. And what if we chase after them? They'll just run away using the same method again, anyway..." (Bathory)

"In, in that case?"

Bathory fell into a dilemma, before she abruptly recalled what Sae-Jin had said, that one about the Vampire Lord deceiving the Vampires.

That was definitely a disrespectful statement that even the most horrifying death wouldn't be enough of a punishment. However....

"...I'm gonna meet with the Lord." (Bathory)

"Eh? Pardon me, my queen. We definitely understand your majesty's fury. However, the Lord hasn't woken up yet, so..."

Hearing that pathetically weak voice, her blood seemed to well up in the reverse direction.

Why did she not possess a single fun lackey amongst all her underlings? Why did every one of them know only to grovel so pathetically?

While she glared at these failures of male kind whose knees and even their heads were firmly glued to the ground, she couldn't help but recall the man who had been next to her only until a few moments ago.

And at the same time, countless flames of anger spiked up, each of them carrying diverse feelings within.

"Shut up, you stinking insects!! I'm going to see the Lord, so just make the godd*mn way already!!" (Bathory)

Her super-loud yell seemed to shake the quiet mountainside.

< 42. Rescue (4) > Fin.

Chapter 146: A Hero, an Orc, a Human (1)

The sorcery activated by the Leviathan, the 'instant transmission', was indeed a success. The place they arrived at was the underground conference room they've been using until now. However, since Sae-Jin activated it in a hurry, he couldn't have waited for all eight people's feet to be on the ground before he activated the spell.

Meaning, a few of them were transferred while their heads or some other body parts were rammed to the ground.

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"Kkyack!!"
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As a result, there was a bit of chaos filled with painful cries, but still, Sae-Jin breathed a sigh of relief after confirming that he didn't leave anyone behind. At the same time, a stinging dizziness from abusing his Mana reserve swept over him.

"Are you alright?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Sae-Jin in his Leviathan Form staggered about, and Kim Yu-Rin helped him to stand still. The weird scene where a human was helping out a 'dragon' became somewhat 'normalised' quickly after Sae-Jin reverted back to the human's appearance.

"Ah, yes. I'm okay. My head's a bit dizzy, that's all." (Kim Sae-Jin)

He massaged his temples as he spoke. Kim Yu-Rin helped him to a sofa nearby.

"To think your Trait is to transform into the Azure Dragon, seriously... Ah, by the way, did you perform that magic spell?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"....Well, yes, more or less." (Sae-Jin)

[&]quot;Eeek!!"

[&]quot;Ah-ahck!!"

"What do you mean, more or less? What, are you adding more or subtracting less?" (TL: Uh, well, here in this line, the author tried another one of his infamous pun based jokes. I thought I could give a direct TL of it a shot, but... Well, I tried...)

Kim Yu-Rin's lips formed a thin smile as she threw him a joke an old man might say. Thinking that it was just impossible to disguise one's real age, Sae-Jin turned to look at her, and...

His eyes widened extra large. Around her mouth and jaw area, huge amount of dried blood could be found there....

"M, miss Yu-Rin?! You are hurt!" (Sae-Jin)

"Eh? But, I'm not in much pain, though?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"But it looks painful from here..." (Sae-Jin)

When he asked her in fluster, she waved her hands around in front of her as if it was nothing to worry about. However, as if bones had been smashed into fine powder, a part of her arm shook around this way and that in a shape of a tree branch snapped in the middle. Sae-Jin's jaw dropped to the floor after seeing this grotesque scene; Kim Yu-Rin belatedly noticed her own conditions, and got shocked out of her skull as well.

"Ahck!! What the hell?!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

".....Fut."

A chuckle automatically crept up on his face as he witnessed her energetic reaction.

"No, wa, wait... This, this type of wound can be healed with a potion. Thankfully, there is a potion over th..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"No, let me take a look first. It's no good to rely on potions if it's broken to this extent. What would you do if the bone heals in a weird way?" (Sae-Jin)

Kim Sae-Jin shook his head in disapproval and grabbed her arm. And after adjusting his Mana appropriately, he poured it under her skin.

"No, I'll be fine. When I get to a hospita.... Huh?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

The shattered bone pieces began shuffling towards their rightful positions, and then, fused together all on their own to revert back to the original shape. This was different from a potion that simply mended external wounds. This was 'complete restoration', nearing the boundaries of the long-extinct 'recovery magic'.

"It's finished. Try moving your arm." (Sae-Jin)

"This, this is... What is going on?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

The confused Kim Yu-Rin moved her arm this way and that and became quite astonished by the result.

"Just what exactly did you do?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"I learned it. Just a bit, from that Bathory woman." (Sae-Jin)

A dumbfounded expression formed on Kim Yu-Rin's face. But, what could she do? The truth was right in front of her eyes, after all.

In actuality, the meaning of the phrase [Understand all knowledge of sorcery possessed by Bathory] wasn't as simple as he 'could use sorcery from now on'.

Its meaning was far more comprehensive than that. He would be able to replicate, in full, all the experience and confidence the Bathory bloodline had accumulated over its countless generations in order to become proficient in performing sorcery.

That was why, Sae-Jin could use at least around '33%' (Degree of Advancement) of all those magic spells that were lost either due to incompetence of modern-day Wizards or through lack of careful management. And luckily enough, 'healing' type magic was included in those magic spells he could perform.

"That, that crazy woman taught you, just like that?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"We negotiated a bit." (Sae-Jin)

"You say negotiations... but how did you negotiate with someone as crazy as her?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

It was then. Yi Hye-Rin hesitantly approached Sae-Jin, seemingly having witnessed the earlier recovery process. No, it was more correct to say, she crawled, with her hands on the floor and all.

"Guild Master, I think my spine is broken. I can't, I can't feel my lower torso at all..." (Yi Hye-Rin)

Yi Hye-Rin was all tears as she looked up at Sae-Jin. He told her not to worry, and then, lifted her clothes just a wee bit. Well, a piece of fabric on the area of contact would be a hindrance, after all. Too bad, Yi Hye-Rin wasn't aware of this.

"Euhgyack?!?! What are you doing?! Especially to a girl who can't even move?! Captain!! Save me, Captain!!" (Yi Hye-Rin)

""

Yi Hye-Rin struggled with her two still-moving arms, but her 'Captain' just so happened to be in cahoots with him. Kim Yu-Rin tightly held on to Yi Hye-Rin's upper torso.

"Please do it." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Huh? What, do what?! Stop!!" (Yi Hye-Rin)

"Your treatment, you idiot. Your treatment." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"...Eh? Ah, aha..."

When Kim Yu-Rin replied, Yi Hye-Rin's struggling subsided. Kim Sae-Jin lifted her top a little bit more. Her waist shuddered slightly, but there was no other reaction beside that. However, Kim Yu-Rin suddenly formed a mischievous expression, and rather fiercely, loudly slapped Yi Hye-Rin's b**t cheek.

"Ah!! What the hell!! Who did that?!" (Yi Hye-Rin)

"Hye-Rin, you really do have a nice body, don't ya~~." (Kim Yu-

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Rin)
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"Eh, ehhh? Ah, don't, don't do that!!" (Yi Hye-Rin)

Slap, slap.

That clear sound continuously rang out.

"S, stop it!! Ouch! Ha, Ha-ang!!" (Yi Hye-Rin)

"....I'll start with the treatment right away." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin felt that if he delayed any longer, he might end up getting implicated in a situation that might prove to be a bit embarrassing for a hot-blooded male like himself, so he quickly brushed Kim Yu-Rin away and placed his hands on the white skin of his 'patient'. Just like he did with Kim Yu-Rin, Sae-Jin poured in his Mana.

Flash!!

Not too long after that, around the waist area where his Mana had permeated into, the bright blue light flashed suddenly.

And that was the end of the treatment.

"It's finished. Try standing up, please." (Kim Sae-Jin)

Yi Hye-Rin quickly tidied up her messy clothes and slowly moved her legs.

"Ohhh!! It's working! It's working!!" (Yi Hye-Rin)

With a deeply moved face, Yi Hye-Rin slowly got up. And after her treatment had concluded, this time it was Hazeline who hesitantly approached him. Seeing her with that trademark hood pulled over her head, she didn't seem injured, so Sae-Jin got confused.

"Miss Hazeline? Are you injured somewhere?" (Sae-Jin)

"Ah, well, yo, you see, the thing is, Mister Sae-Jin..."

However, she could only open and close her mouth like a goldfish and couldn't continue with what she wanted to say. Actually, she was scared of Sae-Jin finding her spotty head disgusting. She

required various preparations before she could brave it, such as taking in deep breaths, taking Cheongsimhwan tablets, etc, etc. (TL: A Cheongsimhwan, literally meaning 'Clear Mind Pill', is a traditional Korean medicine that does what its name says. Apparently. Wikipedia has a page dedicated to it if you're curious.)

As she hesitated, though, Yi Hye-Rin's hands shot out and pulled down Hazeline's hood.

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"Eeek!! Hey, you crazy bi*ch!!" (Hazeline)
"....."
"....."
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Suddenly, the conference room fell into heavy silence. It was as if a ravenous something swallowed up all the noise.

Within this lethal stillness, Hazeline stood there as stiff as a stone statue, cold sweat falling off her face.

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"Ah, uhm... I'm sorry, Unni." (Yi Hye-Rin)
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"Uh, N, no, no, it's fine. I just got so surprised... It's me who should apologise. I actually, you know, I don't curse, like, a lot. I, uh, I got really spooked... I'm sorry."

While the two of them were busy making up, Kim Sae-Jin was able to figure out the reason for Hazeline approaching him – her rather bald head. He smirked a little and placed his hand on her head.

And then, pat, pat.

He gently patted her head.

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"....Ah?"
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From Hazeline's dazedly hanging mouth, a short exclamation was fired out.

"I'm not sure about the length, but I've restored it to a certain degree." (Sae-Jin)

Kim Sae-Jin smiled and spoke to her. Hazeline's two cheeks reddened deeply as she shyly nodded her head. However, Kim Yu-Rin's knife-like glare stabbed into Hazeline's back, so her body shook greatly before she retreated to the back in a hurry.

"T, thank you, Mister Sae-Jin!!" (Hazeline)

"No, I should thank you instead. By the way, Mister Joo Ji-Hyuk, are you feeling okay?" (Sae-Jin)

"Yes, I'm alright." (Joo Ji-Hyuk)

Joo Ji-Hyuk replied like a real man and took a big swig from a potion bottle.

"It's just internal injuries. Huhuhuh." (Joo Ji-Hyuk)

"What about you, Yu Baek-Song?" (Sae-Jin)

"....Why no honorifics when calling me? I'm also fine." (Yu Baek-Song)

Yu Baek-Song stretched her body languidly and walked to her Kaiser the second.

After agreeing to hold meetings regularly once every week in order to counter the sudden counterattack from Bathory and her goons, the unexpected kidnapping incident had somehow been resolved.

Of course, he couldn't avoid being struck in the face, chest, chin, stomach and his head by the sobbing Yu Sae-Jung, but since he received some accidental level-up all of a sudden, one could say it got smoothed over all nice and easy in the end.

'It is regrettable, though.'

Current place was Sae-Jin's home, the one he hadn't been back to in a long while. Kim Sae-Jin brushed Yu Sae-Jung's head lying on his lap while swallowing his frustration. Even with only '33%' of knowledge, not only could he perform the instant transmission, he was also able to completely understand both the composition and the concept of the spells that formed the basis of this advanced sorcery.

It was definitely correct to feel satisfied by this alone, yet, the thoughts of the 'Degree of Advancement' reaching 50% if he had more time kept on popping up his head.

"Euh-euh. No way, nope." (Sae-Jin)

Kim Sae-Jin roughly shook his head and got rid of those thoughts. If he had more time, then he might have gotten utterly murdered by Bathory who would have recovered completely by then. So, there was no reason to get frustrated at all...

It was then. The scheduled TV drama suddenly stopped and a breaking news filled up the screen instead.

[This is an emergency broadcast. A Boss-level Monster called 'Three-Headed Troll Ogre' has made its appearance. It's a Monster possessing two heads of an Ogre and one head of a Troll, and it is currently traversing the Gangwon Province's Monster field towards the residential area...]

Definitely, it was an extraordinary and quite a grave situation, but such an occurrence was seen as a common thing now. The notion of spotting a Boss Monster in a year being one too many had been long since forgotten. Currently, one appeared every three weeks or so like a clockwork. So, besides the Monster's rather lengthy and convoluted name, there wasn't anything special about it...

However, the next words of the anchor were more than enough to steal Sae-Jin's attention completely.

[Integrating other Ogres found in the Monster field and having formed an army, it is now understood that the 'Three-Headed Troll Ogre' and its troops are currently marching towards the village of the Hero Orcs.]

"...Huh?"

Kim Sae-Jin opened his eyes widely. The village of the Hero Orcs...?!

When he woke up from the daze, he realised that he had stood up abruptly.

Kwadang!!

"Kkeuh-euh-euh... Ouch."

Thanks to that, Yu Sae-Jung ended up on the floor.

"Sae-Jung?"

"Seriously... What is it now, Oppa?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"No, uh, well... Don't you need to go to work?" (Sae-Jin)

Yu Sae-Jung replied with a frown while rubbing her aching waist.

"I got some off days after finishing the 'Karerotte' raid yesterday, but why are you asking me that?" (TL: No idea what this Karerotte is. Here's the original Korean word: "카레로트" A quick Googling took me to curry recipes and stuff, which wasn't really helpful…)

"Uh? Ah.... No, it's nothing." (Sae-Jin)

"...What the. Don't tell me, you thinking of doing something dangerous again, aren't you?!" (Yu Sae-Jung)

She glared at him with questioning eyes. Although she was more or less on the mark, Sae-Jin shook his head and both hands in denial.

"Mm? But that's not true? Where would I go when I have you...
Come over here. Come, come~." (Sae-Jin)

"Do you take me for a puppy or something...?"

Even though she spoke as much, Yu Sae-Jung still fell into Sae-

Jin's arms without much trouble. Sae-Jin gently patted her back while he waited for her to fall asleep once more. Thankfully, she did catch her Zs pretty quickly due to being pooped out from the previous day's Boss raid. Sae-Jin carefully laid her down on the couch and slowly got up.

He wrote on a memo, "Something's come up by the Guild. Be back soon", put on some appropriate clothing, and left the house.

'Seems that, for the first time in a long while, I'll get to act out as the Orc...'

Since he might end up abusing his muscles a bit this time, he might as well stretch properly.

As the Hero Orc, Sae-Jin walked the Monster field while frowning in dilemma, wondering whether he should order the Orcs to retreat or not.

The mood of the Monster field was same as always. Within this suffocating stillness, where the only sounds heard were winds brushing by the tree branches, a certain dangerous air of Monsters popping out without a warning could be felt.

However, this place was only the Mid Tier hunting ground. For the 'Hero Orc Chieftain', there was no need for him to tense up at all.

Before long, as he walked proudly like an emperor, he saw the entrance to the village over yonder.

But, in front of the tightly-shut gate, someone who was definitely not an Orc – a human woman, was standing there.

Wearing an artifact-type coat that doubled as an armour on top of the Knights Order's rather-neat official attire, while a goldencoloured weapon was tied to her hips.

The sixth-strongest Knight in Korea, Kim Yu-Rin.

Surprised, Kim Sae-Jin took a couple of steps back. She then sensed a presence nearby and with her hand reaching down to her hips, she turned around to look.

"...Ah."

"Keum."

A pair of short sound effects, denoting the fact that they had recognised each other.

And so, a Lady Knight and an Orc got to stare at each other one more time.

< 43. A Hero, an Orc, a Human (1) > Fin.

Chapter 147: A Hero, an Orc, a Human (2)

The Orc and the Knight stared at each other for a long time. The Winter winds blew and issued a chilly wail as they brushed past the barren branches. From the dim and grey sky, tiny snowflakes fell and melted even before they could meet the ground.

And standing within the mother nature's deafening silence, just how long did their stillness continue?

Dhung-

A nearly imperceptible vibration shook the ground.

"Ah! Ex, excuse me!"

The first one to show a reaction was Kim Yu-Rin. She trotted towards the front of the Orc and stood there. Probably because of these cold months making her face paler than usual, her slightly reddened cheeks seemed to stand out even more.

"An enemy will be arriving soon. It's an Ogre... So, it's like, two heads are Ogres, and one head is a Troll, so, uh..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

However, it seemed like she was at her wits' end trying to explain. Well, it was true that the Boss's name was a bit on the cumbersome side. The Three-Headed Ogre, or to be more precise, Two-Ogre-Heads-One-Troll-Head-Blackskin Ogre - that was its full title. And her troubles came from her trying to explain while excluding the English words that formed all the important nouns in its name. (TL: Okay, so, the author here wrote the Boss's name in Korean as romanised English words. When read, it still sounds like English words. Kim Yu-Rin is trying to say the English word "Head" with their corresponding Korean and numbers counterparts, but well, since I'm TLing it back to English, the tongue-twisting she has to go through has been lost in the translation, so to speak. My bad...)

"Ah-woo.... y, yeah, so, I'm trying to say... Do you by any chance

know what an Ogre is?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

She gestured with her hands this way and that in sheer frustration, before deciding to explain the background information first.

"I know." (Sae-Jin)

"Then, what about Ogres being stronger with more heads and with darker skin tone?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"I know." (Sae-Jin)

"Whew-oo. What a relief. Right now, an Ogre with three heads, two heads out of three being that of Ogres' and the other one being a Troll's, and on top of that, its skin completely black, an Ogre with all these features, is heading this way." (Kim Yu-Rin)

He already knew all these facts, but still, Kim Sae-Jin took a look around anyway. He could only see the barren and eerie Wintery scape as if all life had abandoned this place. Not one trace of humanity could be spotted at all.

"It's you only?" (Sae-Jin)

"Eh? Ah, that's right. It is only me here." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Hmph. Humans, no fight the Boss?" (Sae-Jin)

"Ah, the thing is..."

Seeing how Kim Yu-Rin was avoiding his gaze out of embarrassment, Sae-Jin could roughly guess what had happened.

The situation in Korea was rather difficult at the moment. After all, there were a total of three different Boss Monsters roaming around in the Korean peninsula right now – the demon Minotauros near Pyongyang, a Boss Monster called 'Beherokbel' near Busan, and this Ogre in the Monster field.

If one were to calculate the threat level posed by these Bosses, then the two near the residential areas of Pyongyang and Busan were a lot more urgent, indeed. No matter how much praise was heaped on – the Hero Orcs, the Korean Orcs, whatever – at the end of the day, Orcs were still Orcs.

The Korean government couldn't care any less on whether these Orcs could survive or not; rather, they were hoping that the Orcs would delay the gigantic Ogre and its army for as long as possible.

"Only human fighting, is you? Right?" (Sae-Jin)

"...Yes. That's correct." (Kim Yu-Rin)

It was true that, when in the Orc Form, the tendencies and emotions of the Orc were stronger, but still, he could understand their reasoning. More than likely, it was Kim Yu-Rin who couldn't accept it, thus abandoning her orders and ended up coming all the way here.

"I suggest retreating from this place for now. We're currently building a trap between the border of the Monster field and the city limits, so if you were to cooperate with us there..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"No."

Kim Sae-Jin shook his head. Even if only death awaited them, no such thing as retreat existed for Orcs. Besides, they wouldn't die from the likes of some measly Ogres, too.

"We fight." (Sae-Jin)

His voice was thick, charming and yet quite aloof as well. Kim Yu-Rin could only gulp down her saliva and say nothing.

The words she finally spat out after a lengthy and silent deliberation were something Sae-Jin fully expected from her.

"In that case, please allow me to aid you." (Kim Yu-Rin)

She sounded tense, perhaps worried about being rejected.

However, Kim Sae-Jin didn't say anything and walked towards the interior of the village. Realising that this was him giving her the permission, Kim Yu-Rin followed him in with a huge grin on her face.

Entering the village after such a long time, they could see how greatly it had developed compared to before. Seeing the areas strictly separated into training facilities, food storage, residential areas, smithies, etc, etc, was a rather impressive sight, even to the point where it was difficult to believe the Orcs were solely responsible for all these advancements.

"Wow... Really, everything has advanced by so much."

Genuinely impressed by what she could see, Kim Yu-Rin took in the sights of the village with her eyes extra round. Kim Sae-Jin walked in and called for the Orcs to gather. Approaching with practiced discipline and a certain discernible dignity, the gathered Orcs easily numbered past one thousand.

Sae-Jin swept his gaze over the Orcs once, and shifted his gaze towards Kim Yu-Rin. Receiving his intense gaze, her face reddened deeply, but she pretended to not notice it and simply twirled her poor hair around her fingers.

Sae-Jin smirked and spoke.

"You, take command."

"See, I told you. No one's here." (Bathory)

Around the same time.

Bathory surveyed the dark space she was in and spoke as if she was lamenting about something. The underground city that took so much effort and care to set up was no longer here, and the only thing left was completely, utterly desolate empty cavern.

In other words, the Nosferatus had all fled to somewhere. As if they had planned for this in advance, not one trace of them remained here. So much so, it was difficult to believe that a city had existed in this cavern, even. "My sincerest apologies, my lady. We should have suspected something, the moment they built a village underground to evade our Lord's eyes..."

The voice of an Elder tickled Bathory's earbuds.

Yes, it was an 'Elder'. On the account of the purity of the bloodlines, placed above that of an Apostle and just below her who just so happened to be the ruling class – these were the Elders.

However, the voice of such a man was weak and pathetic.

It wasn't because of the advanced age, either. If that was the case, then when admonishing the lackeys below him, his attitude should remain timid and weak as well.

"Your sincerest apologies?" (Bathory)

"Yes, yes, my lady. We are truly sorry..."

"About what?" (Bathory)

"That is, that we fail to suspect..."

"But why are you sorry? It's Nosferatus who's at fault here." (Bathory)

"Uh...."

"Whatevs. All you lot are just old and decrepit like a flock of beasts, aren't you. You lack backbone, you don't have pride... No, wait. Maybe it's par for the course, since you don't have the necessary strength?" (Bathory)

The day before, Bathory went to meet the Vampire Lord even if her actions could be seen as disrespectful. But he wasn't even there. Instead, one of the Lord's faithful servants gave her an 'advice' – "Better stop with the unnecessary questions."

However, it was not easy to calm the ripples once it began to spread in her mind. At least, she would never be satisfied unless she dug the truth out with both her hands and feet, and confirm with her two eyes the truth that 'it's not true'.

"...Hey, everyone?" (Bathory)

Bathory spoke to dozens of Elders and Apostles who had followed her into this cavern with the most beautiful voice imaginable. Utterly charmed by her, they couldn't even meet her gaze and bowed deeply. Unfortunately for them, Bathory was planning to force them into making the most difficult decision in their lives.

"Decide." (Bathory)

With the voice so beguiling that it could even charm a nightingale and make it swallow its own tongue, she carried on with some seriously shocking words.

"Decide, whether you will follow the Lord, or me." (Bathory)

This was tantamount to her declaring a rebellion. They were in this deep underground where the Vampire Lord's eyes couldn't reach, otherwise if they were in some wide-open field somewhere, they might have died of thirst after losing control of their desire to drink blood. Well, the Lord did possess the power to somehow control that particular instinct of all Vampires, after all.

"B, but, Lady Bathory, that is..."

"Everyone. It is regretful, but I... Well, I don't think I can wait until the Fissure is fully opened up." (Bathory)

Suddenly, around the radius of 500 metres, a dark-coloured Mana spread out and rose up in a dome-shape. It was a barrier preventing the Vampires from escaping.

"So, here's the thing. I feel like I should at least let you in on a couple of things that might help you with making your choices. So, take a seat. Listen well to what I'm about to say, and make a wise decision afterwards, m'kay?" (Bathory)

Before anyone noticed it, a throne had appeared before her feet.

Elders and Apostles listened to her as they continued to grovel on the ground. Kim Yu-Rin began her impassioned mission briefing in front of the gathered Orcs. However, she was simply far too energetic for a Knight about to face a huge scale battle. Most importantly, though, the subjects listening to her wholehearted explanations were Orcs. Although these guys weren't really 'normal', Orcs were only acknowledged to be slightly smarter than a killer whale, so...

"Ogres are the personification of destruction that will fight and kill even among themselves. But the sole reason why these Ogres are uniting, is simply because of the Boss Ogre." (Kim Yu-Rin)

She even resorted to drawing on the wall of the cave to illustrate her point – a lifeform that might be the Three-Headed Ogre, and smaller lifeforms resembling other Ogres following the big one.

"When we kill the Ogre leader, the rest will lose the bond that holds them together and will start fighting each other." (Kim Yu-Rin)

The contents of the plan she was briefing the Orcs on were rather simple. Ignore other Ogres, and just defeat the Boss.

The big problem, though, was the fact that this Boss Ogre was an existence that exceeded common sense.

The results arising from the detailed scientific analysis performed by Monster researchers showed that, an Ogre's strength would increase by four times with an addition of one more head. And this Boss Ogre had two more heads, so it was at least 16 times more powerful than a regular Ogre.

And on top of this, another variable in the form of 'skin' was added to the mix.

An Ogre was stronger the more achromatic its skin tone was. And the standard theory was that, the Ogres with the colours on either end of the achromatic spectrum, white or black, were twice as strong as regular Ogres with brown colour. In other words, even with the most simplest calculations, this Boss Ogre was at least 32 times more powerful than a regular Ogre.

And to add further fuel to this unfortunate situation, one of the heads just so happened to belong to a Troll. A Troll, well known for its incredibly tenacious vitality that even made Knights grit their teeth in frustration.

"Of course, it will be difficult. This Boss Ogre is... unimaginably strong. However." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin shifted her gaze towards Sae-Jin in his Hero Orc Form and smiled deeply.

"However, it will be possible when everyone's powers, the prowess of your Chief, and Cornlak is combined into one." (Kim Yu-Rin)

*

An Ogre ate twice a day. After the meal, for almost half a day, it would not budge from its spot. Meaning, there was at least one or two days of time left before the Ogre army arrived near the village. Kim Yu-Rin utilised this time to train the Orcs as soon as the briefing came to an end. As if her training was harsh to the extreme, pitiful screams of Orcs continued to ring out through the day.

'I should've come later...'

And right now, Sae-Jin the Orc was sitting in the Chieftain's room while deeply regretting his decision. His fault was that, he didn't know of the Ogre's living habits in detail until now. He really thought that these Monsters would flood in crazily as exactly as their appearances suggested, but hell, who knew they liked taking so many breaks in between?

Of course, thanks to that, he was afforded enough time to prepare. Also, it was really smart of him to bring along his mobile phone via 'Spiritualisation'...

[Yu Sae-Jung: Oppa, isn't this just too much?! And why can't you answer your phone!! You think a single memo is going to be enough?! You think I'll stay here forever even after you treat me so poorly?I'm not trying to break up with you, so don't misunderstand me, okay.]

[Yu Sae-Jung: No wait a minute. I take back what I said just now. I'm gonna stay right next to you like, forever. Even if Oppa tells me to take a hike, I'll stay. Like a leech.]

Sae-Jin found it hard to type with his extra-thick fingers. Unfortunately, he still needed to send his reply.

[I couldn't tell you, you were still asleep. Besides, why are you complaining so much when I said I got things to take care of? I should be back in two days' time so stop annoying me with this. One more complaint, and I won't come back for a whole month.] (Sae-Jin)

As he was still in his Orc Form, the reply was bit more brusque and sharper than usual. He thought her feelings might be hurt from this, but her reply arrived less than ten minutes later. And well, her attitude seemed a lot softer than previously.

[...Sorry. It's just that, I got really surprised because you left without saying anything.... By the way, are you angry at me for something I've done, Oppa?] (Yu Sae-Jung)

[No, I'm not. I really want to see you like crazy right now, so stop stimulating my thoughts, okay?] (Sae-Jin)

His words were rather rough in so many respects.

[(An emoji of a hamster holding a heart) Aah-iiiing, what the~~. Ehehe~~. Got it, so hurry home~~.] (Yu Sae-Jung)

[I'll be back as soon as I can. (A heart emoji)] (TL: LOL, an Orc busy sending a heart emoji on his phone. Just picturing this scene cracks me up.)

As he finished up his reply, he could hear the gentle footsteps

outside his room. Sae-Jin quickly absorbed the phone back into his body. It was seriously lightning-quick.

Knock, knock-

There was no need to knock, though – since there was no door to begin with.

"What is it?" (Sae-Jin)

Kim Yu-Rin's head peeked out from the edge when he spoke up. As if she just came out from a shower, her glistening, wet hair cascaded down.

"......Where is Cornlak?"

Hearing her cautious questioning, Sae-Jin lightly tapped the ground. Having been summoned earlier, Cornlak violently rushed into his cavern chamber. As soon as it entered, Cornlak jumped on top of Kim Yu-Rin and began the attack of affection on her for a while.

Dust rose up and dirt thickly permeated the air.

Sae-Jin's brows narrowed deeply, and was about to shout out, when...

"Ahahahaht! Wait, wait!! I got it, I got it, Cornlak!! I said, I got it..."

...He couldn't, after seeing Kim Yu-Rin's bright smile and her happy expression.

< 43. A Hero, an Orc, a Human (2) > Fin.

Chapter 148: A Hero, an Orc, a Human (3)

- "...Eh? What do you mean? What contest?" (Sae-Jin)
- "Nominally, it's an exhibition to see who has contributed to the society more, but is structured like a contest, sir. The government has made the official request just now. Apparently, they wish to comfort the citizens during this time of great unrest." (Jo Hahn-Sung)

Kim Sae-Jin used an excuse of him becoming restless when being idle to leave the village for a short while. Kim Yu-Rin did annoy him by reminding him that they needed to install various traps soon, but when he asked for just one hour, she had no choice but to reluctantly let him go.

"Well, if the intentions are good, I won't say no, but... But, how will a contest like that help with comforting the masses?" (Sae-Jin)

He found a spot within the forest that had no people whatsoever, changed back to his human form, and the very first thing he did was to have a sort-of reunion with Yu Sae-Jung (over a period of 50 minutes) over the phone; now, the person on the line was Jo Hahn-Sung, who said he had business-related matters to discuss.

And the main topic was hosting The Monster's so-called 'Exhibition for Contributions to the society at large'.

Borrowing the name of 'Exhibition', this contest's main aim was to take a closer look at the people within the five categories of Magic, Knights, Art, Alchemy, and society, and by sussing out who had contributed to the world at large the most, admit them in as the newest members of The Monster Guild. And if five categories proved to be a bit too much, then only the two of 'Magic' and 'Knights'.

- "I thought the same initially, but after hearing them out, I believe it's plausible after all, sir. During this troubled times, this

contest has the potential to become something that the citizens, even if it's only by a little bit, could become passionate about and be involved in." (Jo Hahn-Sung)

"Well, if it turns out like that, then that will be wonderful, but will the citizens really focus on this contest?" (Sae-Jin)

No, it was dead certain they would focus on it. First of all, the process would be televised in full.

However, to say they were going to rouse the depressed masses or some such when they were simply trying to find a new member for the Guild, well, that kind of was embarrassing and not to mention, made him a bit hesitant as well.

- "Yes, of course. Not just the country, I'm sure the world will focus on us, sir. Back then, when we picked Director Yi Yu-Jin, fanbases were formed around those so-called strong favourites and they started fighting amongst each other, you see. As we will be officially announcing the candidates, I believe it will get far more heated this time around, sir." (Jo Hahn-Sung)
- "....Really? But still, wouldn't it be troublesome if this thing becomes too successful? I fear, we might end up receiving criticism about lowering the vigilance of the public or something..." (Sae-Jin)
- "The current climate is certainly quite depressing, but I believe being overly fearful is even worse, sir. Even the government thinks that, rather than the problem of vigilance, it is better to lower the excess amount of fear among the public." (Jo Hahn-Sung)

Kim Sae-Jin tilted his head.

- "But, just by hosting an exhibition like this one, people's fears will lessen?" (Sae-Jin)
- "If we choose a few candidates as the new Guild members, then we would be able to advertise nationwide that there are more than enough talented and hardworking Knights or Wizards in our

country that are good enough to enter The Monster. That should be good enough, sir." (Jo Hahn-Sung)

"Aha. Hmm... In that case, alright, please go ahead." (Sae-Jin)

- "Yes, sir. Will do."

Ending the call there, Sae-Jin 'Spiritualised' the phone into his body.

And if he were to add in something slightly unnecessary here, the Spiritualised mobile phone granted a rather peculiar ability to the person performing the technique. The words on the alert window was thus:

[A smartphone has been absorbed via Spiritualisation. By using the eyes of the host, photos and even video footage can be captured.]

Although it did sound kinda fun and slightly interesting, there was no other usage beside that.

"You're ten minutes late." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin's mouth pouted as if to pierce Sae-Jin with them. He scratched the back of his neck and offered up an excuse that wasn't really an excuse.

"I can also be late." (Sae-Jin)

"Hmm.... Fine. Let's get going already. To set the traps." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Thankfully, she didn't complain unnecessarily. Kim Yu-Rin simply grabbed his wrist tightly and moved her feet towards the area where the traps were to be installed. That's right, she was holding his wrist. Although this much skinship should be nothing, the person doing it being who she was, Sae-Jin ended up feeling rather weirded out.

"Oii. Your plan, it will work?" (Sae-Jin)

So, he asked an unnecessary question deliberately, so he could pull his hand out at the same time. However, she held his wrist with an unexpectedly strong grip and he couldn't free himself.

"Yes. You don't have to worry. The odds of our victory are far greater than our defeat, actually. And since foot soldiers are fighting foot soldiers, and leaders are fighting the leaders, the casualties should be minimised greatly as well." (Kim Yu-Rin)

The contents of the 'plan' Kim Yu-Rin was talking about with a healthy smile went something like this.

According to the detection radar of TM, it was suspected that the Ogre army consisted of 50~60 individuals that formed marching columns of 10.

And the Three-Headed Ogre was accompanied by 4 Two-Headed Ogres that acted like its 'royal guards', supposedly showing off the majesty of the commander in the middle of these marching columns.

However, Ogres were known for their low intelligence. That was why, Kim Yu-Rin decided to go with the most basic tactic of them all – traps and ambushes.

Firstly, traps. Using the labour skills of the Orcs, pits would be dug out, and then, a portion of the Ogre army would be drawn there.

Even though an Ogre with two heads wouldn't fall into an obvious trap since it was marginally smarter, an Ogre was still an Ogre at the end of the day. Beat it up good and make it taste more pain than it could handle, then the rage would cause that 'intelligence' to drop to the rock bottom, and the Ogre would follow the bait nice and easy.

"No other things to do, beside that one?" (Sae-Jin)

"Yes. We'll build only build traps for today and return." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Twenty minutes of walking later, Kim Yu-Rin and the Orc army arrived near the vicinity of a river.

Creation of pitfall traps, where the ground was dug out and sharp spikes installed at the bottom, was done in a jiffy. As expected of the outstanding labour skills of the Orcs that even made Monster researchers astonished.

"It's finished~!!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

The final step, covering up the pitfalls with grass also came to an end really quickly. Kim Yu-Rin declared leisurely while wiping away sweat drops on her forehead.

Satisfaction and happiness were quite evident on her beaming face, but Sae-Jin's feelings were a bit different from hers. No matter what, this whole place screamed this here is a trap~~, so this was kinda...

"...Kinda shabby." (Sae-Jin)

"It's going to be fine. Because of their big bodies, Ogres don't pay attention to what's underneath their feet, anyway." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Hmm...."

When Sae-Jin the Orc surveyed the covered up traps with unsure face, Kim Yu-Rin told him not to worry and slapped his back.

"It's going to be fine, so let's go back. I'm tired." (Kim Yu-Rin)

After that, she again grabbed Sae-Jin's wrist and began leading him away.

As if to prevent him from yanking his hand away, her grip was really tight.

Seeing this, her action was definitely not subconscious, but deliberate. Sae-Jin chuckled and rather than pulling away, grabbed her hand instead.

"...Ah?!"

Her face reddened in the blink of an eye, at least initially, but soon enough, it was dyed in the colours of agony next.

"Ah-ahck!! Ah, wha, what are you doing?! Hey, it hurts! I said, this hurts!! Kkyaack!! It's gonna break, break!! The Orc, the Orc caught me!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Obvious. Orcs catch people." (TL: Sigh. Yet another pun-based joke that doesn't work when TLed into English. Well, I tried and failed again. Here, 'catch' in Korean is supposed to imply 'to kill'.)

"Eeee, eeeek!!!"

The sight of her calling out for other Orcs and even Cornlak's help was quite pitiful.

Orcs returned to their village completely fatigued from the installation of pitfall traps.

They pulled out unidentified meat from the food storage, grilled it and consumed it. Then, some sparred for a while, before retiring to their sleeping quarters.

However, Kim Yu-Rin, who was definitely not an Orc, didn't have her own place. So, she found a suitably quiet spot on the cavern's floor and lied down while using Cornlak's belly as her pillow. Even if she was a trained Knight, it still was a cold place to get a shut-eye.

"...Hmm." (Sae-Jin)

As he was exiting his own dwelling in a bit of hurry to make an urgent phone call, Sae-Jin discovered her like sleeping this, so he brought along a thick blanket from somewhere and covered her with it.

But the senses of a Knight were always alert; as soon as the blanket covered her, Kim Yu-Rin's eyes opened up half-way. The sight of a flustered Orc filled up those pair of jewel-like eyes.

Kim Yu-Rin quietly studied him for a bit of time, before smiling lazily and spoke in a sleepy voice.

"I was feeling really cold just now, so... Thank you." (Kim Yu-Rin)

""

Her gentle smile and drowsy eyes caused his heart to skip a beat, but Sae-Jin the Orc did his best to indifferently nod his head and returned to the Chieftain's quarters. No, he tried to, before something caught his eye.

And that was a stuffed doll of an Orc, peeking out from a leather bag by Cornlak's tail.

Unaware of the situation, the grinning Kim Yu-Rin followed his gaze and looked towards where he was staring at. Then, with a short but loud scream of "Ahck!" she jumped up in the air and hurriedly took away the doll.

"I, I, I didn't bring it here, you know?! One of the Orcs made it for me, you see?!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"....One of my Orcs?" (Sae-Jin)

"Ye, yes. His skill was really great, especially for an Orc..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"That, looks like me?" (Sae-Jin)

The appearances of Kim Sae-Jin's Orc Form and other Orcs had distinct differences. It was to the point where a dumb-a*s monkey would end up thinking, 'Oh, he must be their leader', or even, 'why is he more handsome than the others?'

Just as Yi Hye-Rin alluded to in the past, his appearance was indeed better than certain sections of humanity.

".....Completely, definitely, it's not you. Seriously, you must be suffering from the prince syndrome..." (TL: the author wrote "도끼병" which is a slang term that doesn't have any direct translation.

The closest I can think of is "princess syndrome" but since the MC isn't a girl, I changed it "prince" instead.)

She stealthily hid the leather bag behind her.

"Okay, then." (Sae-Jin)

He smirked and returned to the Chieftain's quarters.

She must have thought she made a good excuse, since he could hear her sighs of relief coming from behind him.

And after Sae-Jin returned to his quarters, it took a considerable amount of time before he realised that he was actually trying to go outside in order to make a phone call.

*

"They come." (Sae-Jin)

In the far off distance, even if one didn't open their eyes wide, the gigantic silhouettes could still be spotted. A casual glance was enough to determine that their numbers easily exceeded 60. Although it was only 60 in number, Ogres were powerful highlevel Monsters that lived in the upper Mid Tier hunting grounds and above.

It was not easy to fight against a single roaming Ogre, so seeing that many of them in one spot, even if they weren't all that well organised, was enough to make Kim Yu-Rin tense up.

"Have you gotten familiarised with the plan?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Yes." (Sae-Jin)

Right in the middle of the somewhat sloppy 10-man marching columns of the Ogres, an Ogre with especially humongous body stood tall. Three heads and jet-black skin – it was extremely rare to see Ogres possessing either one of those features, yet this greedy b*****d had them all.

Once that Ogre army arrives at the predetermined location, 950 Hero Orcs would appear from both flanks and distract them, which

should cause around 40 Ogres to break the formation.

When that number broke loose from the formation, then it would be the turn of Kim Yu-Rin, riding on top of Cornlak. She would gift enormous amount of pain on the Boss Ogre and its lackeys, thereby luring them into the ambush location where Sae-Jin and his company were waiting.

Afterwards, they would kill off those annoying small fries first, and when the Boss Ogre was the only one left, Kim Yu-Rin would use her Trait to knock it out for around one minute. Then, everyone would attack it.

"Knocking it out, you confident?" (Sae-Jin)

"Yes. Although it was just a summon, I did knock out a Leviathan for five minutes in the past. To be precise, it wasn't knocking it out but making it fall asleep, though." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Hmm."

Sae-Jin the Orc nodded his head. Since he personally witnessed that scene, there was no need to question her.

"Then, I should be on my way. You should also get to the ambush location as well." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Wait." (Sae-Jin)

Just as Kim Yu-Rin grasped the reins of Cornlak...

"Before you go, take." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin handed over a pennant featuring the insignia of the Hero Orcs to her. It was one of those super expensive 'passive artifacts' that boosted the performance of the person simply by having it on the body.

"A sign, you, our comrade." (Sae-Jin)

"Ah...?"

Kim Yu-Rin dazedly looked at the pennant, before gently

receiving it with both her hands and she brought it to her chest.

"...Thank you." (Kim Yu-Rin)

SFX for a loud calling of a horn

It was at this very moment when the horn of an Orc Great Warrior blew. With that as the signal, Orcs moved towards their assigned positions in a swift, disciplined manner. 950 warriors divided into two equal halves and went to left and right, while the remaining 50 Orcs carefully made their way towards the location where Kim Yu-Rin was to lure in the Boss Ogre.

"Please go ahead and wait for me." (Kim Yu-Rin)

As her eyes got wet by the depths of her emotions, she climbed aboard Cornlak and headed off towards the battlefield.

There was virtually no change to the low intelligence of the Ogres; the battle unfolded exactly as Kim Yu-Rin had planned. Around 40 or so Ogres got split up and fell into the pitfall traps, while the Boss Ogre got struck real hard by Kim Yu-Rin, and unable to calm its overwhelming rage, it crazily chased after her.

"They come. Get ready." (Sae-Jin)

20 paces.

20 paces later, and twenty-odd Ogres would arrive where Sae-Jin was. He spoke to other Orcs and took in a deep breath.

Khoong, khoong, khoong!!

Numerous and chaotic footsteps – no doubt, the Two-Headed Ogres and the Three Headed Boss Ogre were mixed up in there.

Sae-Jin closed his eyes and left his body to the five senses, with the notable exception of his sight. Well, to be perfectly clear, the gigantic bodies of Ogres were too big for his eyes to fully capture, anyways. So, the closer he got to these Monsters, the greater hindrance his vision would become. (TL: Hmm, I'm not so sure about that...)

Sensing the incoming enemies with his entire being, Sae-Jin grasped his mace tightly. He drank the Spiritualised 'Goblin's Rage' potion and activated the 'Warrior of Reversal' as well.

Khoong, khoong, khoong.

As his senses expanded, their footsteps became slower and slower.

Khoong, khoong, khoong.....

And so, when he heard the third footstep...

Pouring all his soaring might and overflowing rage, he swung his mace as hard as he could at the ankle of the Ogre that was about to go past him.

KWAHAHAHANG!!!

The destructive strike possessing the terrifying might utterly smashed apart the ankle of a Two-Headed Ogre in one swing. Losing one of its legs, this Ogre collapsed on the ground, and many Orcs descended upon the fallen creature.

However, Kim Sae-Jin's eyes remained closed. The Hero Orc's body was glowing in bright red, and his mace swung out in search for yet another victim.

KWAHANG!!

A huge shock wave shook the entire mountainside.

< 43. A Hero, an Orc, a Human (3) > Fin.

Chapter 149: A Hero, an Orc, a Human (4)

Although the Orc Chieftain's body was far smaller than an Ogre's, his battle prowess was, simply put, overwhelming.

Whenever his mace came in contact with the flesh of Ogres, their limbs and bits of the body would be ripped asunder. When the mace hit the ground, a deep crater was formed. And even when swung in the empty air, the mace created powerful ripples of shock waves that danced like crashing waves.

Since the most powerful combat force of the Ogre army, the Boss Ogre, was tied up by Kim Yu-Rin riding on the back of Cornlak, the overall battle situation was greatly favouring the Orcs. Right now, 51 Orcs were busy beating down on twenty-odd Ogres, and more importantly, these Orcs were not just ordinary Monsters either.

'It's going well.' (Sae-Jin)

From just about everywhere, grotesque sounds of maces hitting flesh and the said flesh being ripped off resounded out, nonstop. And as the time continued to flow on, sounds of giant things crashing down to the ground intermittently shook the world. That was the countless Ogres falling down while leveling the trees of the forest.

As more and more Ogres fell, 51 Orcs became progressively more drunk by the sweet taste of victory and moved even more energetically.

30 minutes later.

They only required 30 minutes to kill off all the other Ogres besides the Boss. To kill 20 Ogres, only 19 Orcs lost their lives in the process.

Only then, Kim Yu-Rin stopped circling around the Boss Ogre to infuriate it, and climbed off Cornlak's back.

Khoong, khoong, khoong!!

In front, the Boss Ogre was rushing towards her direction while blowing his top off with boiling rage, and behind her, Orcs covered in Ogre blood were getting ready for the final showdown.

"Everyone, block the Boss Ogre, please." (Kim Yu-Rin)

The initial battle had ended only about a second ago, yet, with a single word from her, the Orcs madly dashed towards the Boss Ogre. And as they delayed the Boss, she readied her Gungnir. The pure-white blade shined in brilliant golden light as it morphed into a spear-like shape.

The 'purpose' of this attack was simple.

'One minute of unconsciousness.'

Normally, a minute was a really short amount of time, but it was a different story during a battle. No one would dare to assign a value to one minute of time during an intense battle like this one.

"!!!"

However, unexpectedly, Mana contained within her entire body got sucked out into her weapon. This meant that it was not possible to carry out her 'purpose', so Kim Yu-Rin had no choice but to withdraw her Mana back from Gungnir.

'But, why?'

Mana she couldn't withdraw in time left her body for good, and her remaining reserve was only 50%. She didn't do anything, yet ended up losing half of her fighting strength, in other words. Obviously, she couldn't comprehend this situation. Her Trait allowed her to put a summoned Leviathan to sleep for five minutes, yet why couldn't she do the same to an Ogre...?

"Kkheuaack!!"

The screams of Orc Warriors floated into the stupefied Kim Yu-Rin's ears.

While she remained dazed, time marched on and Orcs were

getting killed.

'If I no longer have teeth, then I will use my gums!'

Just as she resolved herself and gritted her teeth...

From behind the giant Ogre, a cute lifeform flapped its wings and flew up into the air. It was a familiar enough shape to instantly rouse her anger simply by looking at it. And it was none other than the same b*****d that stole away her Mana when she was trapped underground with the Orc.

The 'Korean crow-tit', that white bird.

"That f*cker!!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

They said enemies would encounter each other in the middle of a narrow bridge. She so badly wanted to pluck out every single feather off that thing and BBQ it right there and then....

But Kim Yu-Rin did her best to calm her trembling hands and her madly pounding heart. For now, she really needed to take care of the Boss Ogre first.

She poured Mana back into Gungnir once more. She didn't bother with placing a 'purpose' this time around. No, all she wanted to do was to pour every drop of remaining Mana into her weapon and pierce the heart of the Boss, that was all.

Wuwuwuwu....

Gungnir resonated with her Mana and glistened brightly in golden light. Emitting a divine aura and causing tremors to break out on the ground, the Gungnir fired off a single white line of blinding energy beam.

KAH-AH-AH-AH!!

The firing and hitting the target happened almost simultaneously. The heart of the Three-Headed Ogre was penetrated in an instant, and Sae-Jin the Orc, who had timed his jump to perfection, poured all his strength into the mace and

fiercely struck the back of one of its heads.

Without a doubt, Kim Yu-Rin's lethal attack on the Boss's chest wasn't going to be enough. However, it was now combined with the terrifyingly fierce strike from Sae-Jin as well, so the Ogre didn't even have the chance to show off its infamously tenacious vitality.

SFX for a pathetic roar of a dying Monster

In the end, the Boss Ogre issued a low cry as it slowly collapsed on the ground. Following that, excited roars of the Orcs spread throughout the mountainside.

"No, wait!! It's not over... Kkheuck!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

However, it was still early for the victory celebration. She needed to let the Orcs know. Unfortunately, Kim Yu-Rin could only grasp near her heart and fall to her knees. It was an adverse side effect of extracting too much Mana all at once.

Thankfully, though, the words she wanted to say, Sae-Jin shouted out loudly instead.

"It's not over yet!!Oi, you okay?" (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin approached Kim Yu-Rin while maintaining the Orc's vigilance.

"Yes, I'm fin....!!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

At that moment, Kim Yu-Rin dazedly froze up. Soon afterwards, a huge shadow was cast over his head and to the ground. Sae-Jin hurriedly turned around, and found the Boss Ogre with its eyes shooting out chillingly dangerous light throwing a punch that burned with intense jet-black energy.

Sae-Jin pulled Kim Yu-Rin into an embrace and immediately retreated from there.

KWAHANG!!!

Fortunately, the Boss's attack was one step late. Unfortunately,

right in that moment, towards the direction he had retreated, a Breath attack rushed in.

"Kkhyaaah!!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Sae-Jin quickly chucked Kim Yu-Rin away to a far off distance with a strength that could easily throw her several mountains over, and evaded the Breath. However, this Breath attack curved around the corner and followed his path of retreat. At the same time, the swift punch of the Three-Headed Ogre flew in as well.

Funnily enough, the Boss's punch should have been a lot slower than this. But it was not so. Even the Monster's eyes gleamed differently. They were far more violent and oppressive than ever before.

Only then did he remember. One or two fortunate Trolls, when somehow surviving the near-death experience, would go on a rampage akin to going through the "terminal lucidity".

"Sh*t!!"

The destructive fist came flying in along with the Breath attack. If Sae-Jin evaded the fist, then he'd be struck by the Breath, and if he evaded the Breath, then it would be the fist, instead.

However, there was one other option left to choose. And the instincts of the Orc pulled Sae-Jin towards this choice.

Firstly, he increased the flow of blood within his body. Then, at the same time, he used the Skill 'Warrior of Reversal and overlapped it with the increased blood flow. And finally, he added in the increased physical strength and defense he 'gained' from the Bathory woman.

This was the essence of purely chasing after the most powerful physical body attainable. And this feeling gave the most profound sense of enhancement ever felt in his entire life, to the slave creature born only to fight – the Orc.

Firmly standing on the ground, he began to endure the Breath

attack that came washing over him. Because he was rescuing Kim Yu-Rin, he had to discard his mace some time ago. But that didn't matter anymore. Just his bare fist was enough...

KWAHAHAHANG-!!

The fists of the Ogre and the Orc collided in the air. A huge explosion blew up like a blinding lightning where the two fists met and dyed the world in pure white, while the ground below disintegrated without a trace.

Nothing could be seen. But still, Kim Sae-Jin felt the Ogre's arm in contact with his fist slowly disintegrate as well, and he closed his eyes.

[Condition cleared: Commitment and sacrifice.]

[The Monster Form, the Orc Chieftain will be upgraded to the Great Orc Chieftain.]

[Acquired the Orc's unique Skill, the 'Essence of the Orc'.]

[The 'Essence of the Orc' resonates with 'Bathory's muscle composition & bone density' as well as the 'Mana Body'!! Special property, 'The Most Pure Divine Body' will be...]

Kim Sae-Jin's eyes slowly opened within the blurry darkness.

That g*****n white bird...

Seeing that the first thing he did was to get angry, it looked like he was still in his Orc Form. But there were lots of problems; he could blink just fine, but his body wouldn't budge an inch. Perhaps this was the expected result, after having been hit by the Boss Ogre as well as taking a Breath bath all over his body.

"Hmm..."

His voice still managed to leak out, somehow.

Suddenly, he got curious. He did fight to the death with the Boss

Ogre, but what happened to that white bird? That b*****d's body seemed to have gotten a little bit bigger than before, too.

"...Yawn~."

He felt sleepy and a yawn came out all on its own. He rolled his eyes somehow and took a look at his own body that resembled a charcoal. This was on the level of a miracle, him surviving all of that. It seemed that he had unconsciously used up as much as 30 healing potions in one go, judging by the alert window for the Spiritualisation that said [90/100].

And just how much time passed by since then?

Suddenly, he thought of something else.

'....This might be the good time to retire the Orc Chief, isn't it?'

Currently, the most useful Monster Forms had been set in stone already. Even though this Form had evolved into the Great Chieftain, this was the limit for the Orc as a species. So, it made sense to utilise the limitless Leviathan Form as well as the Lycanthrope that had near endless potential all of the time from now on. As an aside, he had given up on his Goblin Form a long time ago.

But, before he could do that, there was one sticking point to consider.

Kim Yu-Rin.

She had this 'special' feeling towards the Orc. And he couldn't tell exactly what type of feeling this was. He could only suspect that it was a bit deeper than friendship or loyalty felt towards one's comrades.

Beside all of that, though - the one thing he had to do first, was...

"...For now, I should really go home." (Sae-Jin)

He had no idea how many days had passed since the battle. And there was someone waiting for him back home. Sae-Jin changed into the Leviathan Form and summoned up what little Mana he had left to activate the 'sorcery'.

The destination for his instant transmission was the underground secret conference room. He came here, since Yu Sae-Jung might get shocked by his sudden intrusion – although she knew that he could change into the Leviathan already. Other Forms were still a secret from her, though.

"It was only a day?!" (Sae-Jin)

As soon as he arrived, he checked the calendar first, yet it only had been a day. What a relief that was. Breathing out a sigh of relief, Sae-Jin fell back down on the couch, and as sleep slowly encroached on him, he thought about calling Yu Sae-Jung on the phone...

"...You've returned?"

"Mommy?!?!" (Sae-Jin)

He got shocked out of his slumber by a foreign voice greeting from somewhere and hurriedly shot up from the couch.

The voice belonged to Lillia.

"Wha, what the hell?! What are you doing in here?" (Sae-Jin)

"We ran away. Our plan failed, after all." (Lillia)

".....Ah, aha."

"And also, Mister Sae-Jin personally told us this as well – to reestablish our sanctuary below The Monster's grounds and continue living in the meantime." (Lillia)

She came closer while talking to him, and handed over a bottle of potion.

"You shouldn't sleep like that. Please, drink a potion before falling into a slumber." (Lillia)

"Oh, uh, thanks." (Sae-Jin)

Gulp, gulp-

Since he drank a potion, he thought might as well, and switched on the TV.

During the short news broadcast informing the viewers about the chaos near Pyongyang being taken care of, the incident related to the Orc came on and took up the top billing.

In short, Kim Yu-Rin had survived, thankfully. Apparently, Cornlak had rescued her amidst the explosion that resembled a nuclear warhead going off, caused by the Breath attack and two fists violently colliding. The end result was that a radius of 10 KM around the blast area had become nothing but ash and collapsed into utter ruin.

In other words, the fate of the remaining Orcs were unknown.

Did they all perish? Sae-Jin felt his chest tighten after hearing the news.

"That's causing quite a bit of chaos at the moment. I hear that the Orc sacrificed himself to kill a dangerous Boss Monster?" (Lillia)

"...Ha, haha..."

"Miss Hazeline was really stunned when she heard the news, saying what if you really died there. All the media outlets are reporting that the Orc Chieftain and the Boss Ogre engaged in a bitter battle to the death and both died in the end." (Lillia)

Kim Sae-Jin stared at Lillia and smirked.

"Tell them to alter 'Chieftain' to 'Great Chieftain' instead." (Sae-Jin)

"Fuhut."

Lillia's eyes slightly arched up. Sae-Jin's brows narrowed instead, seeing her relaxed reaction.

"Hang on. Why are you smiling like that as if you knew already?" (Sae-Jin)

"Did I do that?" (Lillia)

"...What the. So you really knew about it already?" (Sae-Jin)

"You can think of it any way you like. Well, please excuse me. I have too many matters to attend to." (Lillia)

She got up from her seat after handing over a mobile phone to him.

"Also, you should not forget to call the Madam of the house." (Lillia)

On a particularly clear afternoon, Sae-Jin paid a visit to Kim Yu-Rin's hospital room. As soon as he cracked open the door, he spotted Cornlak, its body much smaller now. He sent a mental order to the wolf, telling it to act like it hadn't recognised him. Cornlak loyally carried out his order and remained lying down on the floor.

"Oh, hello Mister Kim Sae-Jin. Nice to see you again." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin greeted him with a bright smile that was completely out of his expectations. Flustered slightly, Sae-Jin sat down on a nearby sofa while feeling rather disappointed for some reason.

"How are you feeling?" (Sae-Jin)

"I'm feeling fine, thank you." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"....That's a relief." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin replied in confusion and shifted his gaze to the LED TV's screen. Contents regarding the Hero Orc were on at the moment. And probably because of the programme, not much of a conversation happened between the two of them.

Sae-Jin was cautiously observing the situation, while Kim Yu-Rin was looking at the TV with a healthy smile on her face.

- The Chieftain of the Hero Orcs is believed to have lost his life during the great explosion. Countless citizens, saddened by the loss, have formed lengthy queues to pay respects, and...

While listening to the anchor's voice, Sae-Jin mustered up enough courage and asked Kim Yu-Rin.

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"...That Orc, did he really die?" (Sae-Jin)
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"Nope."

Her swift and assured answer surprised Kim Sae-Jin. While clutching her right fist tightly, she continued.

"Definitely, he's alive somewhere." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Then, she looked at him and smiled brightly.

He belatedly discovered the Orc's pennant clutched within her right hand. He, too, smiled along with her.

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"Oh, that's right. Guild Master?" (Kim Yu-Rin)
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"Yes?"

Winds gently blew in from the open windows and scattered her hair like the falling and dancing petals of a cherry blossom tree. As he was thinking, how beautiful, she spoke to him in a resolute voice.

"Maybe, just maybe, I'm asking you, but... Do you still wish to seduce me?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

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".....I beg your pardon?!"
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< 43. A Hero, an Orc, a Human (4) > Fin.

Chapter 150: Suspicion and Alliance (1)

"Do you still wish to seduce me?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Sae-Jin needed full five minutes before he finally deciphered that her fleeting words were actually concerning the Guild. And that only came about thanks to the brightly-smiling Kim Yu-Rin clearing up the air after she saw Sae-Jin completely freezing up.

"About the Guild, Mister Sae-Jin. The Guild. Just what were you thinking about?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

".....Aha."

He cleared his throat with a couple of fake coughs. He got quite embarrassed by the thoughts that were swimming in his mind just now and cold sweat drops trickled down the back of his neck.

"But, why so suddenly? Didn't you refuse resolutely back then, since you were to become the next Order Master of the Raven?" (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin asked her, and Kim Yu-Rin replied in a whisper, her expression slightly bitter.

"I've received disciplinary action. For disobeying the orders. One can't become an Order Master for a government-run Knights Order if he or she has a disciplinary record. No, even holding onto the position of the Highest Tier Knight will become uncertain as well." (Kim Yu-Rin)

That was probably the result of the incident related to the Orc. Although she did successfully defeat the Boss Ogre, that didn't mean she had the right to disobey the orders from the higher-ups and disregard the rules and regulations of the Knights Order.

He didn't dig in deeply, choosing to simply smile and nod his head.

"Yes, we'll be delighted, for sure. And it's a good timing too,

since we're in the middle of picking new members as well." (Sae-Jin)

".....Huh? E, excuse me. Wait a minute, are you saying I must participate in that contest, too?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Slightly flustered, Kim Yu-Rin tilted her head while her eyes opened up extra round. He dazedly wondered what this woman was on about, before assuming a relaxed smile.

"But, of course. The thing about the Guild Master personally recommending someone, that has ended a long time ago, so I wonder what Miss Yu-Rin wants from me now? Besides, didn't you say that your rank as the Highest Tier Knight is in a precarious position? If you drop from your Tier, then well, do I even have a reason to accept you in the first place?" (Sae-Jin)

"Eh?! No, wait. What are you even.... saying..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

She pouted to show her slight dissatisfaction. However, since it was quite clear who the person handing out the dough was, all she could do at that moment was to complain softly to herself.

"But I even helped you out... And back then, you were the one begging me..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Well, the circumstances have changed a great deal since then. Our Guild, The Monster, isn't an organisation you can just waltz into, just because you want to.... Oh, you heard of the overseas Order called Veritas? Did you know that the Order Master of the Veritas even asked us about joining the Guild recently?" (Sae-Jin)

""

Kim Yu-Rin narrowed her eyes as thinly as a flatfish, her cheeks puffing up greatly. Her facial expression seemed to say "I'm really unhappy right now". Although it was very cute and all that...

"So, are you planning to enter the contest? Or are you not going to? Ah, that's right. If I were to explain all the benefits the Guild members receive as an aside... You receive a basket of highest grade potions every month; with the Guild membership card, you can rent out up to three artifacts from TM's Artifact Shop free of charge; and once a year, you're given the first refusal on the Orc Blacksmith's wares..." (Sae-Jin)

Kim Sae-Jin continued to mutter out a list of benefits that would prove fatally attractive for either a Knight or a Wizard – no, a person living in the troubled current times. Kim Yu-Rin's face started off pouting, but the more she heard, the wider her eyes and mouth became.

Honestly speaking, that was an amazing amount of stuff being offered. Only now had she finally realised why all those Knights kept on singing on and on about The Monster, all the bloody time.

"And finally, if you want one, the Magic Tattoo..." (Sae-Jin)

Even before he could finish his words, Kim Yu-Rin hurriedly grasped both of his hands.

"I'll, I will participate!!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Her voice was clear, confident, and most importantly, deeply determined.

With many corporations, Knights Orders, and even Wizard Towers participating, the Exhibition held by The Monster was able to draw out an explosive amount of attention from the public, as expected.

And probably because the three Boss Monsters causing chaos in the country had been subjugated right before it started, the whole country talked about nothing else other than the Exhibition. All the internet portal sites, TV networks, newspapers, and even SNS – the categories were only 'Knights' and 'Wizards', but in the country of Korea at the moment, these two were the most important professions there could be.

For now, it was the middle of the public voting cast by the

citizens of the entire country. This was the popular vote 'chosen by the public'; after the professional judges narrowed the potential list of candidates down to top 200, 198 candidates agreed to participate in the Exhibition, and from there, a total of 60 people – 30 per category – were chosen as the final candidates. (TL: Whew, boy. This whole paragraph was a nightmare to TL. Had to rejig quite a few bits to make it all fit sensibly in English.)

Sure enough, the fights between several fanbases of popular candidates became truly intense, and most SNS and community chatrooms soon morphed into arenas of fierce verbal warfare by the ardent fans.

However, the clear favourite would always emerge even from under such situations.

– I am... not really good with things like this, but... I ask you for your generous support!! Please, vote for me! (Kim Yu-Rin)

With the support of her pure and beautiful face, it was none other than Kim Yu-Rin, doing her own PR work while looking rather bashful by the occasion.

On the other hand, Sae-Jin ended up getting busier and busier as the interest towards the Exhibition exploded crazily upwards. Well, it was only right that he worked hard and saw the thing to the end, since he did start this whole affair, after all. He performed several interviews, broadcasts, speeches in public stages, etc, etc..... He poured over eight hours everyday on matters related to the contest/exhibition.

"Ah, and this will be the final question! Well, let us take a look at Miss Kim Yu-Rin's promo footage!"

Inside a certain cafe that was completely rented out by a TV station, dozens of cameras were focused on one particular man, and just outside the cafe, a huge crowd of people were looking inside through the thick windows. Of course, this was all because of Kim Sae-Jin, the interviewee.

– I am... not really good with things like this, but... I ask you for your generous support!! Please, vote for me!

"What do you think about Knight Kim Yu-Rin, who is deeply entrenched in the first spot within the 'Knight' category at the moment? Aht, looks like Guild Master has been already won over, after seeing your reactions!"

The reporter asked him while playing the clip of Kim Yu-Rin's promotional video. This was the final question of the final scheduled interview for the day. Feeling like the liberation he craved for was just around the corner, Sae-Jin replied as lightheartedly as possible.

"I haven't focused on the candidate Kim Yu-Rin specifically. In all honesty... Miss Yu-Rin isn't really my type, you see... Hahaha. I'm just kidding. It's a joke. I simply think that all the candidates participating are equally amazing individuals, that's all." (Sae-Jin)

"Oh, oh~. Do you mean, you won't fall for a honey trap, is that it?"

"Well, that is true, but... The truth is, it isn't me who gets to choose the new members of the Guild this time, but it's up to the public to decide, isn't it?" (Sae-Jin)

"As expected of the Guild Master~. Ah, there is also something else. Honestly, I'd like to ask you one last final question. By any chance..."

Sae-Jin was about to get up from his seat as soon as the final question was answered, but the darn reporter fired off his next question like a machine gun.

Just where on earth could anyone find the so-called 'last' in the 'final' question..... But he was being surrounded by cameras right now. Sae-Jin did his best to soften the rapidly-hardening face and replied as sincerely as he could.

Sae-Jin finally returned home after clearing up his schedules. But unfortunately, what waited for him there was, rather coldly enough, yet more work.

"The Kraken again?" (Sae-Jin)

- "Yes, sir. This time, it's Japan."

The so-called 'it' item, and going through a huge explosion in popularity currently, was the services of 'Sahrahng', that any nation who cared for its citizens must purchase at least once – landlocked countries excluded, of course.

Sahrahng was the name of Sae-Jin's Kraken; weirdly enough, countless citizens in many countries readily accepted this somewhat romantic name. That name ended up having an unexpected PR benefit, somehow.

"Right away?"

- "Yes sir. They say the situation is quite urgent there. So, they promised to pay twice the regular compensation."

"Seriously, do they think this is some sort of nighttime discount or something... Well, it doesn't matter to me either way, but I wonder if Sahrahng can endure any more of this..." (Sae-Jin)

He was speaking nonsense, of course. He could simply summon it and send the darn Kraken on its way, just like that. But there was a reason why Sae-Jin was deliberately hesitating – the guilty party was a set of very seductive lingerie Yu Sae-Jung was wearing in front of him at that very moment.

If he were to summon Sahrahng, then until the Kraken's job was finished, Sae-Jin had to change and remain in the Leviathan Form. Obviously, he would have to give up on enjoying the pleasures of his human form in the meantime...

"It's alright. Actually, I wanna see the Azure Dragon more than Oppa right now~. It's so cute, you know?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"What?!" (Sae-Jin)

Suddenly, she pushed for the dispatch of the Kraken quite inexplicably.

"Hey, whose side are you on?" (Sae-Jin)

"Hahat, kidding, just kidding. But still, the safety of the Japanese citizens is hanging in the balance, right? It's definitely correct to take care of that first. I mean, when Oppa starts our thing, you last 2 to 3 hours at minimum, after all." (Yu Sae-Jung)

She tightly hugged his back and whispered to his ear. But what made him feel pretty good wasn't that hug, but her words 'lasting 2 to 3 hours at minimum'. Those words easily stroked his pride as a man and of course, the flames of his ego...

"He, heum. Right. Can't be helped. It'll last for over two hours, after all. Right, right."

Within the darkened ruins that once served as Nosferatus' sanctuary, restoration work was being performed under the orders of Bathory. She decided to utilise this place as her new headquarters.

And so, Vampires were busy using magic to restore the fallen buildings, build brand new residential structures, and other construction work at the moment.

"You're saying that squid also belongs to Kim Sae-Jin?" (Bathory)

Of course, the person responsible for ordering the massive construction project was comfortably lying on a couch while watching the TV. She was watching the news broadcast concerning the activities of a Kraken with a somewhat embarrassing name called 'Sahrahng'.

"Yes, that is correct, my Lady."

"...It's like he has everything I want to own, you know? Maybe

his hobby is similar to mine or something. Heck, I also wanted to possess that white tiger he was with, too..." (Bathory)

The news regarding the Kraken ended fairly quickly. And it was so adorable, too... Bathory licked her lips and expressed emotions of wanting to see more, but was unable to. However, the next piece of footage then showed off a news that inflamed her interest far more greatly than the previous article could ever do.

- Currently, the total number of votes cast by the public in The Monster's Exhibition now exceeds ten million. This is...

The Monster – the world-renowned Guild that even the word 'Guild' wasn't a good enough fit to describe it. And the head of that Guild was Kim Sae-Jin.

Bathory recalled the acute recollection of the fine past (?) quite unexpectedly, back when she tore into him and he tore into her. Those days when they were vicious and so beast-like.

"....Hey, wait a sec. Didn't you say something about one of my Wizards being undercover there as a candidate? Isn't she a bit famous or something?" (Bathory)

"Ma'am? Ah, oh, yes, that is correct. She's called 'Emil Rerheu of the Great Wisdom' and it's the cover identity of the Apostle Reuhemile, my Lady. According to human's grading system, she's A-class, in other words, a high tier Wizard."

"She disguised herself as an Elf?" (Bathory)

"Yes, my Lady."

"Hmm....."

Bathory rubbed her chin and fell into a deep chain of thought.

Nowadays, something was weird about the way the Vampire Lord moved around. No, instead of calling it weird... well, he hadn't shown up at all lately. Bathory trusted her instincts greatly, and right now, she could smell something very rotten coming from the Lord's camp. It was even more smellier than a clogged up sewer.

And more importantly, Kim Sae-Jin's eyes that were filled with unshakeable confidence when he said, "The Lord will betray you."

That weighed on her mind the most.

"Okay, let's do this. I'll enter the exhibition disguised as her. It's easier than drinking cold soup for me to change my face with magic, see." (Bathory)

"Yes...... yes?! Wha, what do you mean by that, my Lady?"

The Apostle couldn't even speak properly after he got stunned from her sudden declaration. In this critical time, as the Fissure was nearing the complete unsealing, just how many times did she have to act out of control?

"I've got things to talk about with that conceited b*****d, Kim Sae-Jin, you see? And besides... if all goes well, we can even cooperate together, too." (Bathory)

The 'Fissure' opening in full and becoming the 'gate' was already an unavoidable fact. There was not one existence alive in this world that could close the Fissure that was about to open up, after all.

However, if the Vampire Lord did indeed plan to betray her, then she needed to hit him first before that happened. Just from this point alone, the possibility of cooperating together with that stinking human rose up. She was thinking of outwardly allying herself with that b*****d and getting rid of the Lord, then kill Kim Sae-Jin at a later date, and finally possess the rich orchard called the Fissure all for herself.

"Co, cooperation, with measly humans?! But how...?"

"You chose to serve me, not the Lord, no? That's why you built your little nest in here, too. If the Lord is really thinking of funny things right now, shouldn't we get him first and set the plan on the correct path?" The Apostle questioned, but the smile on Bathory's lips grew thicker the more he asked. And confronted by that beautiful yet lethal smile, the only thing this Apostle could do was to nod his head quietly.

< 44. Suspicion and Alliance (1) > Fin.

Chapter 151: Suspicion and Alliance (2)

Exactly two weeks had passed by since the Exhibition got under way.

And, as if to completely mock Sae-Jin's initial worries of "Will the public shake off their fear and unite for something as unimportant as picking new members for his Guild?", the whole thing continued on, while proving to be a roaring success in the process.

Now, the new worries were of people shaking off too much fear, and the excessively united solidarity of the citizens was rapidly changing into a problem instead.

Why didn't the fans stop at praising the candidates they liked, and found a need to irritate and attack others, too? Sae-Jin just couldn't understand it. But whatever the case may have been, 15 Knights and 15 Wizards, for a total of 30 participants were finalised.

And here on out, these people were to engage in things like physical battles between Knights, and magic competition between Wizards, and steal "points" from other contestants.

"This is beyond the level of simple chaos, you know? Even in the Dawn, everyone is talking about this only." (Yu Sae-Jung)

While a refreshing smile was pasted on her face, Yu Sae-Jung's eyes were watching the TV, her right hand moved the mouse connected to the notebook PC, and finally, with her left hand, she was busy sending text messages via her smartphone.

It was a near-miraculous multi-tasking.

"By the way, Sae-Jung... Why are you so busy?" (Sae-Jin)

"Uh? Ah, well, I'm quite busy lately just as much as you, Oppa. See, since Oppa doesn't wanna hang out with me no~ more, I was forced into discovering the importance as well as the joy of

socialising. So, I went to lots of gatherings and stuff, and well, it's like, people are really curious right now – just what will be the next test, internally whom we are rooting for, that sort of stuff." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"....Oh, really?"

Sae-Jin sneakily shifted his eyes and looked at her phone's display. Really, endless stream of messages were popping up on a group chat room she was participating in. However, the name of the chat room was... 'The Dawn Knights Order 1st Team Super Elites Meet'. Although it was a rather childish title, '1st Team' was usually made up of the core fighting force of the Knights Order, so it wasn't a baseless boasting at all.

"…!"

It was then, the eyes of the 'Wolf' sharply gleamed. It was not because of the group chat, though – no, it was because of a private messaging box floating on the middle of the phone's display that popped up just as he sneaked a glance while Yu Sae-Jung's attention was turned towards him.

[Kim Jung-Ho: Miss Sae-Jung, whatcha doing?]

Even with a quick glance, that was a guy's name; on the profile pic, even an image of a guy prominently on display, and to cap it off, those words that would be interpreted as that guy having interest in her, regardless of who read it...

"That's a man." (Sae-Jin)

A cold voice leaked out of Sae-Jin before he noticed it. Yu Sae-Jung tilted her head in a slight bafflement.

".....Eh?"

"That. That guy, on the phone. That's a man, isn't it?" (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin pointed at the phone. But, by then, the alert for receiving a PM had come and gone.

Her eyes followed his pointing finger, then her brows narrowed slightly.

"What the. You were sneaking a look at my phone?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"What do you mean, sneaking? I can see it plainly in the open." (Sae-Jin)

"Oh, man. You don't let me see your phone no matter what, yet you look at mine without permission?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

She puffed her cheeks in a show of annoyance. However, he didn't have the leeway to mind that right now. Still, she did look quite adorable while doing that, so he patted her head anyways.

"No, wait. You just received a text from a guy, see. And he was definitely flirting with you." (Sae-Jin)

"This is a group chat, so no idea what you are talking about... Wait, Oppa doesn't know what a group chat is? You know, group chat rooms. That's where a group of people converse by sending text messages..." (TL: Well, some of you might think there's something a bit strange here, but that's because Yu Sae-Jung is using the abbreviated form for 'group chat room' in Korean – 단톡. The last one, she says it in full. 'Group chat room' in Korean is 단체 톡방. And I tried to TL as literally as possible. This is the result...)

Kim Sae-Jin's forehead creased up deeply. Was she treating him like an 80-year old or something...?

"I know what a group chat is, okay? But that message wasn't part of the group chat, but a private message. I saw it." (Sae-Jin)

".....Mm?"

Her face wavered in dazement. Sae-Jin didn't miss this chance and extended his hand out quickly.

His purpose was to forcibly kidnap, the aim being her phone.

However, she swiftly hid the phone behind her back.

Her reaction speed was really fast. But that only fanned the flames of suspicion, instead.

Sae-Jin's brows quivered in dissatisfaction.

"Give me that. Why aren't you giving it to me?" (Sae-Jin)

"Wait, just wait for a second, okay? This, this isn't what Oppa thinks..." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"That is why I'm telling you to hand it over. Hey, why did that guy call you Miss Sae-Jung?" (Sae-Jin)

"He's... the son of Jaesung Group's VP. Because he's the last born, he can't inherit the family business. So he focused on being a Knight, and now, he's a High Tier with the Raven Order, and his future prospects are really promising..." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Yu Sae-Jung began spouting gibberish with a reddened face.

"No, you don't have to read out his resume. Just give me the phone." (Sae-Jin)

"R, really, it's nothing important, really. Oppa also sometimes message Hazeline Unni, right? It's like that." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"What?"

Suddenly, he got really furious. The messages he sent to Hazeline now and then were....

D**n it, this is what they call 'double standard', isn't it? (TL: the author used a popular Korean abbreviation/slang word "내로남불" which can be literally TLed into: "When I do it, it's romance, but when others do it, it's cheating." You probably can see why I omitted that and used 'double standard' instead...)

Sae-Jin held his breath back and calmed himself down, before slowly continuing on with his words.

"...You're right. It could also be like that. However, here's the thing. Does that guy know you and I are in a relationship?" (Sae-Jin)

Hazeline was acting in that way even though she knew this fact. However, she had the sort-of suitable excuse of Elves being hopeless in love, so what did this guy, Kim Jung-Ho, has for one?

Hearing his question, Yu Sae-Jung rolled her eyes over and over as if she was trying to think of something, but eventually, spat out a lengthy sigh and murmured her reply.

"No. He doesn't know." (Yu Sae-Jung)

She utilised the moment of Sae-Jin freezing up in shock and poured out the rest of the story.

"Well, within our Knights Order, not many people know of us living together." (Yu Sae-Jung)

".....But, how come?"

"That's because we haven't officially announced it." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"But, anyone with even half a brain should know by now. We've been living together for so long now. No, wait. Fine, some people might not know, that's true, but didn't you say he's the last born from a big Chaebol family? So how can he not know?" (Sae-Jin)

Yu Sae-Jung smirked slightly. Of course, within certain circles of reporters, her living together with Sae-Jin was already an open secret. But since almost all of them kept their mouths shut real tight, not even those commonly-seen office memos circulated. After all, being frowned upon by The Monster and the Dawn was buying a one-way ticket straight to career suicide.

"Ng. He doesn't know. It's like he's been abandoned by his family, you know. He's a really pitiable guy in that regard. People within the Knights Order think the same, too – it's like, we're close siblings, an older brother and a younger sister. Except for Mister Joo Ji-Hyuk, though." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Really? No, there is no way that's the case. That guy most likely knows of our relationship already. No matter how abandoned he is by his family, the big corporation..." (Sae-Jin)

"Here. Here, why don't you take a look? Look first before you judge." (Yu Sae-Jung)

As if she thought Sae-Jin had softened enough now, Yu Sae-Jung handed over her phone quite easily.

"Look, look. It's really nothing like I told you." (Yu Sae-Jung)

If Sae-Jin was a man possessing generosity that was as wide as open seas and endless rivers, then he might have returned the phone back to her while saying, "No, I believe in you," with a firm, dignified, yet considerate voice.

"But, well, open seas and rivers are just too small to contain a Leviathan, though." (Sae-Jin)

"......What are you even talking about?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

He muttered some incomprehensible excuse and checked the contents on the smartphone.

[Miss Sae-Jung, you coming to today's business conference?] (13th February, 10:03 AM)

[Nope. Why should I go there?] (13th February, 09:43 PM)

[Haha, is that so? I can't go there, even though I want to...] (13th February, 09:45 PM)

== (Similar types of messages continue. Omitted by the author. No, really.)

[Kim Jung-Ho: Miss Sae-Jung, whatcha doing?] (4th March, 06:33 PM)

Sae-Jin found Yu Sae-Jung's defenses quite satisfactory. However, why on earth was this fool, Kim Jung-Ho, being so persistent...? While he was concentrating on the phone, Yu Sae-Jung moved her agile, cat-like hands swiftly and snatched away his phone instead.

"I'm gonna look at Oppa's phone, too." (Yu Sae-Jung)

In that moment, Sae-Jin froze up like a statute. Thankfully, though, he hadn't had much contact with women of late.

Even Hazeline stayed away, too. As if she became conscious of her actions, other than leaving comments such as "Photo came out nicely" on images he uploaded on his Insta*ram account every now and then, she did not make one single attempt to call him up for personal matters.

"Hmm, hmm. Yep. Good." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Finishing her inspection in less than three minutes, Yu Sae-Jung put his phone down, quite pleased by the result. Then, she slid into Sae-Jin's embrace quite comfortably.

"Ah, that's right. Oppa, why didn't that Wizard from Bangbae-Dong become a candidate?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Mm?"

"No, I mean, doesn't he have a good relationship with us? He did give us all of his grimoires and stuff, too. I hear that the reason for the participating Wizards being so hands-on during the contest is because they wanna enter The Monster's members-only library, the only one in the world where the full set of his grimoires are being kept in one place. Also, didn't he release the grimoire number 25 not too long ago?"

Two days ago, the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong published the grimoire number 25. It did incite the predictably-explosive reaction, but unfortunately for everyone, the only place this book was displayed, was The Monster's members-only library.

The reason why it hadn't found a home in other Wizard Towers yet, was... because of the truly intense behind-the-scenes battle going on at the moment. Besides the excessive attempts at suppression, simple threats of exposing one's corrupt dealings if one did not give up trying to purchase the grimoire were thrown

around, and even some local Wizard Towers lobbied the government to expel the members of overseas Wizard Tower representatives from the country...

And Sae-Jin wasn't aware of such vulgar, disgusting, and desperate warfare happening beneath the surface.

"Ah, the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong?" (Sae-Jin)

"Ng. I'd like to meet him at least once." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Yu Sae-Jung spoke to him with a bright smile on her face.

Seeing her totally oblivious and quite adorable smile, Sae-Jin made up his mind, his lips quivering a little. It seemed that, the time to tell her the truth about this Wizard persona had arrived. She knew that his Trait was him transforming into the Leviathan. She also knew that he could borrow the Leviathan's powers while he was "human", as well.

"The Wizard of Bangbae-Dong, is me." (Sae-Jin)

".....Ng?"

After a lengthy silence, Yu Sae-Jung asked back with a dazed face.

"What? What do you mean by that? The name of the Bangbae-Dong Wizard is 'Meh'?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

He thought she was joking, but her expression and the tone of voice were serious. Sae-Jin broke out in a hearty laughter and shook his head.

"Hahaha. No, I am the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong. You haven't noticed at all?" (Sae-Jin)

"Uh, uh.... What did you say?! But, but how!! You're lying!!" (Yu Sae-Jung)

Utterly shocked out of her mind, Yu Sae-Jung jumped around wildly, then she grabbed his shoulders and shook him hard.

"Think about it carefully, now. The Leviathan is a creature of magic. And why would the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong, who had no contact with us, give us the grimoires?" (Sae-Jin)

".....OMG." (TL: LOL, the raw doesn't say that, but I inserted that in. The raw is literally one word: "Hul". It has no meaning other than to express one's shock.)

Within Yu Sae-Jung's eyes and mouth that couldn't get any wider, astonishment filled up. Although this was quite similar to when he confessed to being the Orc Blacksmith, the shock she received seemed to be far greater this time around.

However, she recovered not too long after, and then began calculating potential profit and losses.

"O, Oppa, in that case, can you let the Dawn keep the grimoires of Bangbae-Dong Wizard? You know, right? That we've been working hard to establish a Wizard Tower for a while now." (Yu Sae-Jung)

".....What the heck, that's all? You aren't gonna be shocked anymore?" (Sae-Jin)

"Huh? Ah! No, I'm really, stupefyingly stunned right now! Woo-wah!! Woooooowsers!!! Oppa, you're so amaaaazing!! Really!" (Yu Sae-Jung)

Seeing her like this, using hands and feet to express how 'stunned' she was, she seemed definitely a lot more vibrant and cheerful than in the past. Comparing the first time he met her to her of now, it was to the point of him feeling a huge sense of change from her.

"Oppa is so handsome, and his body is so buff, and he can make such nice weapons, and now, he can even use magic so nicely, too....." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Yu Sae-Jung dug deeper into his arms while whispering in a 'pity me, please' type of voice. Sae-Jin stared at her dumbfoundedly,

before a slight smirk crept up on his lips.

"Let's do it this way. Divide the shares of the Wizard Tower between the Dawn and The Monster. With that, not only the grimoires will be furnished in their entirety, but even the Wizard's name will be associated with the Tower." (Sae-Jin)

The negotiation began in earnest.

Yu Sae-Jung's eyes shook imperceptibly.

".....Huh? But, but why? Why? That doesn't make sense at all...
The Monster didn't even help out when the Dawn's been trying to set up a Wizard Tower until now." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"But I'll be helping out with this, right? And it'll also be a huge help, too. The grimoires of the famed Wizard, plus his name on top. With that, as soon as the Tower gets off the ground, I'm pretty sure it'll become a recognised Tower right away." (Sae-Jin)

" "

Around three seconds of silence later, she sneakily slipped out from his embrace, took her phone, and made a call to someone.

Sae-Jin leisurely waited for the 'other' side's opinion.

The middle of March. The martial contest between Knights and the magic competition between Wizards, that drew in over 40,000 live audience per match, finally came to a conclusion.

Kim Yu-Rin recorded an overwhelming 14 victories and zero defeats within the Knight category, while on the magic category, an unknown Elf Wizard named Emil Rerheu recorded the same overwhelming record as well.

Through various other tests such as defeating Monsters, contribution to the good of public interest, game show-like battle of common knowledge, etc, etc, twenty candidates out of remaining thirty got disqualified. And those who got disqualified,

while leaving behind 'GIFs' of themselves looking remorseful, discontent or furious – one Wizard even broke down and cried his eyes out – disappeared to where they came from.

Kim Sae-Jin then decided to have an one-on-one interview with the ten remaining candidates. He wanted to weed out bad characters, of course, and the broadcaster also wished to capture the process as well.

"Pleasure to meet you, Wizard Emil Rerheu." (Sae-Jin)

"Me too, it's a nice pleasure~."

The first interviewee happened to be the Wizard, Emil Rerheu. He sensed a somewhat dangerous and insidious aura coming from her, but Sae-Jin decided not to judge too prematurely.

"The scores for common knowledge is... zero?! Reading up on the follow-up words of the judges, this is on the level of a primate or a reptile... It seems that, you haven't studied a lot until now?" (Sae-Jin)

He deliberately threw out the sensitive topic first while activating the Eyes of the Wolf. He was trying to see into this Wizard's heart and her personality.

".....And what crappy thing are you trying to pull here?" (TL: Guess who?)

She smirked refreshingly, before emitting a bit of Mana all around her, destroying every single camera installed in the interview room.

"What the...!!" (Sae-Jin)

"I'd prefer you stop looking at me with those disgusting eyes. I mean, I came all the way here just to negotiate, yet you're making me want to kill you right now, you know."

Along with thick killing intent, the outer skin of the Elf Emil Rerheu melted down like a dough.

And the person revealed was Prillani Bathory.

Sae-Jin couldn't help but admire her perfect disguising technique. Really, did this mean that the 'queen' in the state of perfection could even fool the senses of the Wolf?

"Hello, kid. Been a while." (Bathory)

Bathory lightly tapped on his neck as she spoke. Right away, the interior of the room darkened and got separated from the rest of the world.

".....Uh-whew. Yeah, it has been a while. Another isolation barrier?" (Sae-Jin)

Unlike his relaxed exclamation, his heart was beating like crazy in his chest.

"Yo. You don't have to tense up so much. I came here to cooperate with you, after all." (Bathory)

"Cooperate?" (Sae-Jin)

"That's right." (Bathory)

At Kim Sae-Jin's still confused face, Bathory showed a cheeky smile.

"You see, I'll help you kill the Vampire Lord. How about it?" (Bathory)

"What.....?!" (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin's consciousness shook for a moment after seeing her smile. But that was all. Several alert windows indicating that Skills had been activated popped into his view one after the other, instead.

[The unique Skill, 'The Most Pure Divine Body' has activated.]

[Bathory's ultra-high grade Seduction magic has been resisted!]

[A part of the Seduction magic has been reflected back to the original caster!]

Immediately, her brows quivered ever so slightly. The alert windows informed him of the reason. However, Sae-Jin maintained his poker face and tilted his head.

'Whew-woo...'

So, this new Skill helped him out in this manner. Sae-Jin let out a silent sigh of relief while checking out the information window for 'The Most Pure Divine Body'.

[The Most Pure Divine Body]

- The host's body will be purified of all impurities.
- Depending on the will of the host, the physical strength of the body can be raised up to a maximum of 1000%. However, the higher the percentage, the shorter the duration.
- The Proficiency Level of the Skill, 'Resistance', will be increased. And as a part of the defense mechanism, certain amount of the resisted magic or physical attack will be reflected back.
 - Will be applied to all Forms.
 - < 44. Suspicion and Alliance (2) > Fin.

Chapter 152: Suspicion and Alliance (3)

"....You sure know some weird tricks, don't you?" (Bathory)

Bathory glared at Sae-Jin as she spoke. It was just her looking at him, yet the pressure emanating from her eyes felt like a noose was tightening around his neck. If a normal person faced such a cold pair of eyes, then that person would've kicked the bucket in that instant.

"What are you on about?" (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin replied with the most deadpan expression he could muster. Bathory hadn't sensed that he consciously invoked magic, so she did not say anything else.

"Fine, whatever." (Bathory)

The weighty Mana pressing down on his entire body was withdrawn. Sae-Jin felt a slight sense of enervation.

"Woo-uh." (Sae-Jin)

"So, you gonna cooperate with me or what?" (Bathory)

Bathory crossed her arms while displaying the unsatisfactory mood. But right now, Sae-Jin could not understand this new attitude of hers. Seriously, back then, she wanted to rip his limbs apart just for questioning the Vampire Lord, yet, here she was...

Bathory didn't wait for his answer and continued with what she wanted to say. This one, though, was as far removed from the main topic as humanly possible.

"Oh, by the way, kid – just what is this 'The Monster' and why is it causing such a chaos? Seriously, 'it' does something, then fools rush in like a mad mob, and that inconveniences me greatly. Did you know that I so wanted to kill a few b*stards on my way here but had to endure it so much?" (Bathory)

The Elf Wizard Emil Rerheu enjoyed huge fame. Of course, odds

were, that was due to the aura of seduction inherent within Bathory's Mana, but still, the size of her fanbase was second only to Kim Yu-Rin's.

And to be brutally honest, it was understandable why Emil/Bathory's appearance on TV screens garnered so much popularity. She wielded refreshingly awesome destruction magic to blow everything away and acted like the queen that she was – exuding an aura of a tyrant, to boot.

"Watch the TV, you'll know. It's the world's greatest Guild. Offering the best advantages in the world, and the world's best welfare benefits, too. The top Guild in the world that every Knight and Wizard wish to join." (Sae-Jin)

His voice overflowed with pride.

"Hmm... But, don't you think it's funny to talk about the world when you're from this tiny-as-a-rat's-a*s land?" (Bathory)

"Then, just what are you idiots trying to do in that tiny-as-a-rat's-a*s land in the first place?" (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin looked straight into Bathory's eyes and retorted. Her expression was rather unreadable, hard to tell whether she was peeved off or happy. But, she hardened her face soon enough and asked him once more.

"....The cooperation. You in, or not?" (Bathory)

"You should tell me the contents first." (Sae-Jin)

"I told you already. I'll help you to kill the Lord." (Bathory)

It was such a different attitude compared to the past, when she was still worshipping the Lord. It was questionable how could a person change so quickly, but still, it would be great if one more thorn in his side was removed permanently.

But the problem was after Bathory had become the new Lord.

"And after that?" (Sae-Jin)

Kim Sae-Jin sharply opened his eyes.

"After that, you people should do whatever accordingly." (Bathory)

Bathory sneered as she continued.

"Hey, you. I think you're mistaken about something here. The portal opening up, that's like, set in stone, you know? No matter how much you struggle, that'll never change. You should be preparing for the 'aftermath', instead of thinking about blocking the portal or something~." (Bathory)

"In that case, killing the Lord is one of the things to prepare for the 'aftermath', is that it?" (Sae-Jin)

"That's right. According to your guess, the Lord wants to return to the Earth's past, no?" (Bathory)

""

Sae-Jin shut his mouth.

Initially, he did think that the Lord wanted to return to this planet's past. But after giving it more thought, he became aware that this was not the correct guess as well. The odds of the Lord's plan being not about going to the past, but maintaining the same timeline as the stage called the Earth and moving to another dimension, were very high.

So, Sae-Jin explained this to Bathory.

"....That's complicated. Make it easier to understand." (Bathory)

"Okay, so... If the Lord succeeded in going back in time, then the 'present' should have been affected, right? Like, because of the Lord going back in time, the world should have became the paradise for Vampires or some such. But that didn't happen. So, I'm saying, my initial guess is not correct. That b*stard is trying to jump dimensions only." (Sae-Jin)

"....And when you say dimensions, you saying there can be many

of those existing in the same space?" (Bathory)

"Correct. One of the definitions applied to the Fissure is that it's a gap between different dimensions and different worlds, so you can get to other dimensions through it." (Sae-Jin)

The reason why Sae-Jin said all of this, was to tell her that killing the Vampire Lord had nothing to do with the preparations for the 'aftermath'. Technically speaking, the Earth of another dimension had no relation with the matters of this world, after all.

As if Bathory somehow understood the meaning behind his explanations, her face crumpled to resemble a rakshasi. (TL: A rakshasi is a female version of rakshasa. Google one to get the feel for how 'ugly' it looks. Beware of the Bollywood film popping up instead, though.)

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"So, you don't wanna cooperate?" (Bathory)
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""

Sae-Jin didn't reply immediately. And within this silence, Bathory forced out a smile and began emitting Mana from her body.

"You're not gonna answer?" (Bathory)

There was no need for an answer, though. For better or worse, her helping out in killing the Vampire Lord would be a good thing, after all.

However, he simply maintained his silence while transforming into the Lycanthrope.

Since she came to seek cooperation, that meant, at minimum, she wasn't thinking of killing him here. In that case, he wouldn't miss this chance to drink some more of her blood.

"You really ain't gonna answer." (Bathory)

Bathory's face became dumbfounded. But Sae-Jin simply pounced on her without a single shred of hesitation, pressed her

down with his arms and his jaw descended down on her pale smooth neck.

[The blood of Bathory has been ingested....]

Accompanying that feel-good alert window, a huge impact shook his brain. Bathory simply punched the side of his head. However, her strength in 100% condition was truly terrifying...

"Kkyaaachk!!"

One saving grace was that she'd suffer the same amount of damage as Sae-Jin received. While borrowing the strength of the potions, he pounced on Bathory once more.

*

After getting beat up by Bathory till he was on the cusp of dying, Sae-Jin acted as if he had no choice while accepting her offer. Right next day, he organised a meeting.

The participants were Kim Yu-Rin, Yi Hye-Rin, Hazeline, Yu Baek-Song, Joo Ji-Hyuk, Lillia, Kim Sun-Ho, and even Rhosrahdel. All eight of them gathered in the secret underground conference room.

Kim Sae-Jin unpacked the rather horrifying prospect of cooperating with Bathory to the gathered members first, and then explained what they had to do next.

"For now, Rhosrahdel will continue to stay beside Bathory." (Sae-Jin)

"....Huh?!"

At Sae-Jin's orders, Rhosrahdel's expression collapsed like that of a person who just lost his country or something.

"Obviously, we will need someone to spy on her movements. And as for actual gathering of information as well as searching for locations, Miss Yu Baek-Song and Mister Kim Sun-Ho, please handle them along with the available intelligence operatives." (Sae-Jin)

"Got it."

"Yes, boss. Understood."

Yu Baek-Song and Kim Sun-Ho nodded their heads. However, their sights were locked onto Kaiser the 2nd acting coquettishly on Sae-Jin's thighs.

"As for the Knights, please concentrate on getting stronger. Also, Miss Kim Yu-Rin should be unfamiliar with handling a Griffin, so please head over to the Nesting area and get to grips on how to control a Griffin perfectly. Ah, after the Exhibition ends, of course." (Sae-Jin)

"Yes, I understand!"

Kim Yu-Rin replied back energetically. And so, Sae-Jin was able to end the meeting quite quickly.

Next up, was Yi Hye-Rin's mischievous expressions of her admiration.

"Ohhhh~~. Our Guild Master looks so cool today~." (Yi Hye-Rin)

"....Please stop joking around." (Sae-Jin)

"Ehehehe. Ah, right – will it be fine with a non-Guild member taking part here?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

With a guilty face, Kim Yu-Rin's shoulders trembled.

"It'll be fine, since her admission is almost a sure thing anyway. So, everyone, disperse! We don't have much time!" (Sae-Jin)

Bathory said the Fissure/portal should fully open up between October and December, so they indeed didn't have a lot of time left. No, it was more correct to say it was imminent.

At Sae-Jin's words, the members all replied with lots of spirit and hurriedly went on their own ways.

10 days later, 2nd of April.

The Exhibition that garnered so much of the public's passionate support finally ended.

The successful candidates in the Knight category were Kim Yu-Rin and Joo Oh-Hyung, both of them Highest Tier Knights. A pretty interesting spectacle of sorts unfolded on the presentation stage during the final broadcast where the successful candidates were announced – Kim Yu-Rin's serene speech on her thoughts on entering the Guild contrasted rather sharply with the heartfelt dedication read out by the tearful Joo Oh-Hyung.

On the other side, the two Wizard candidates who made it were a male Elf named 'Bretin', as well as Emil Rerheu, as promised to Bathory previously.

However, Bathory wanted to look stylish in an old fashioned kind of way, and quoted a four-word idiom during her acceptance speech. Unfortunately, she used it in such a wrong context, it wasn't even funny anymore. Kim Sae-Jin just couldn't understand why she ended up saying the four-word idiom "Eup-Cham-Ma-Sok" during such a happy occasion. (TL: This idiom actually comes from the Romance of the Three Kingdoms. This author must have a thing for RoTK or something. Basically, it means foregoing personal feelings and upholding the military command structure, or something similar to that effect. Not sure how you can Google this one if you're interested in finding out what's what. Oh well.)

But he heard on the following day, that it was Rhosrahdel who deliberately fed Bathory nonsense in order to publicly embarrass her.

And predictably on the day after that, Bathory found the truth out via the Internet and invaded the Guild HQ in unbridled rage while shouting out that she was going to kill Rhosrahdel.

Fortunately, though, the temporary cooperation pact between her and Sae-Jin remained intact.

- The completion ceremony for the Dawn Corporation's and TM's Wizard Tower, the collaboration of the Dawn and The Monster.
 - The unrivalled financial muscle and The Monster, combined.
- According to the Dawn, the time to invest more capital and to diversify its portfolio is when the state of current affairs are at most unstable.

And then.

Another nuclear bombshell dropped. A Wizard Tower that the Dawn Corporation and The Monster each held 5.5:4.5 of shares was officially launched.

Obviously, that alone lacked the necessary oomph to cause a commotion in the country.

Even if it was the Dawn, the number 1 in the business sector, a modern day Wizard Tower was a cradle of wisdom built from dozens upon dozens of years of accumulated experience and knowledge. The consensus of industry experts from other Wizard Towers were that, even if it was the Dawn, one should be ready to endure decades of losses and ridicule.

However, a news with an 'exclusive report' tagged on got published soon after, and the whole situation got turned around 180 degrees.

A Wizard that didn't put down his roots in any Wizard Towers until now.

Not only referred to with the worldwide recognition as the greatest talent in magic, but also being seen as a true iconic genius – the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong.

He had proudly aligned his name with the Dawn's new Wizard Tower.

As if that wasn't enough, not only he offered up his grimoires

number 1 to 25, he also announced on his blog that, all subsequent published grimoires would be donated to the Tower, as well.

It was, without a doubt, a scoop on the level of nuclear explosion, and many Wizard Towers felt like they had dropped a newborn baby in a mud pit, and realised they had no choice but to give in.

And now...

The protagonist that had pushed other Wizards into a state of confusion and terror was actually enjoying a holiday of sorts, that was a world far removed from the whirlwinds of the Wizarding community.

"So, how is it? How's the media reacting to the news?" (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin tightly hugged Yu Sae-Jung, who seemed to be stuck like a glue to her notebook PC, and asked.

"It's seriously great. The number one liked comment is [the Dawn and The Monster and Bangbae-Dong Wizard come together, and the nature's balance is upset.] Heeheehee." (Yu Sae-Jung) (TL: Our delightful author tried another weird pun-based joke that I just don't get. Consequently, I couldn't TL it literally, as well. Thus, this is the result...)

"Is that so? Hey, you seemed to be really interested in this Wizard Tower business, though." (Sae-Jin)

"Ng, of course. I pushed for this business venture, after all." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Really?"

"Yep. That is why, the Tower's Operational Director is me~." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Yu Sae-Jung pecked a little kiss on Sae-Jin's cheek and smiled happily.

As an aside, a Tower Director and a Tower Lord was not the same. If one thought of Tower Director as a chairman of the board,

then the Tower Lord was like the dean of a school. And sure enough, a Tower Director's powers were greater than that of a Tower Lord's.

"What the. Why didn't you say anything? I'd have negotiated with a bit more leisure, then." (Sae-Jin)

The guy in charge of making this deal work, Jo Hahn-Sung, negotiated so tenaciously that even left the representatives of the Dawn utterly blown away. According to him, a former superior officer who bullied him in the distant past just so happened to be one of the Dawn's negotiators, so that was why...

"It's alright. After all, my share is fixed at 35% anyways. The rest belongs to my grandpa and my dad. It'll be better if Oppa has the rest, instead." (Yu Sae-Jung)

""

Should he feel proud of her or be sorry for her? Sae-Jin formed a slightly apologetic smile, leaned his head on her shoulder, and they looked at the notebook PC together.

"Oh. Hey, isn't this guy the Vice Lord of the Seoul Wizard Tower? And this person over here, that's the Tower Lord of Busan Tower, right?" (Sae-Jin)

"Ng. I thought they would be people that lacked nothing, but the amount of requests for open position coming through is just so much. Someone's PR/resume data was as big as 1GB, you know?Ah, that's right. Even foreigners sent in some. Look, look. Here's the Tower Lord for the Velli Wizard Tower, ranked fifth in the world."

Yu Sae-Jung pulled up a photo. And the Tower Lord shown was a female Elf with a slick figure that sure fitted the name of the Tower. She must be really good at belly dancing... (TL: Oh boy, yet another pun-based joke by the author. I did what I could, but you be the judge...)

"Hah, how ridiculous! Hey Ahjussi, where do you think you're looking at?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

".....Ah, it's nothing. Cough. Well, it's all good news. Our Wizard Tower should grow fast at this rate." (Sae-Jin)

"....Ng. The influence of the Bangbae-Dong Wizard was really huge. We only have around 100 grimoires stored in the Tower, but over a thousand Wizards are applying to enter, you know?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

A single grimoire was really expensive. And it was also difficult to procure one, too. Most regular mid grade grimoires fetched upwards of several million dollars. But more importantly, even with enough money, the products themselves were not available to begin with, so it was virtually impossible to buy one.

Well, even the Dawn couldn't purchase more than 75 grimoires (25 grimoires of the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong not counted), so there...

Many of the grimoires stored in a Wizard Tower were actually developed and invented through hard work and as well as the investment of a great amount of time by the Wizards affiliated with that Tower.

"So, that is why..." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Yu Sae-Jung formed a content but suspicious-looking smile as she sneakily scratched Sae-Jin's thighs.

"If Oppa works just a bit harder.... We might be able to grow at a tremendous rate, am I right?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

Her hands became a bit more strange and daring. So, Sae-Jin smirked a little, and...

"In that case, I'll decide who gets to become the Tower Lord."

....And, he reopened the negotiations.

Yu Sae-Jung's eyes trembled like a newborn chick.

< 44. Suspicion and Alliance (3) > Fin.

Chapter 153: The Entry (1)

The ribbon-cutting ceremony to commemorate the end of the construction work for the Dawn and TM's new Wizard Tower was taking place at the site of the Tower located in Seoul's Seocho-Gu. The identities of every single audience member present were who's who of biggest corporations out there. For instance, people like TM's CEO, Jo Hahn-Sung, and from the Dawn's side, the sole grandchild of its Chairman, Yu Sae-Jung. (TL: A "-Gu" is a district and it's bigger than a "-Dong" which is a suburb.)

"The Knight Yu Sae-Jung's the representative from the Dawn, huh."

This Wizard Tower was built in the city of Seoul. This inevitably meant that it would compete against the Seoul Wizard Tower, widely seen as the Seoul's best, and consequently, Korea's best Tower. So, the Director of the Seoul Tower personally came here to gauge the flow of atmosphere around these parts.

The Tower Director spoke from behind the heavily-tinted car window while looking at Yu Sae-Jung.

"Jo Hahn-Sung from TM... They must be expecting great things, since Kim Sae-Jin's right hand man is here in person."

"Yes. It's quite likely that both TM and the Dawn has poured all their resources into this venture."

Within the financial circles, Jo Hahn-Sung was well known for his straightforward personality and tenacious drive to succeed, which made him a man others should not mess with. But that wasn't the only reason.

Kim Sae-Jin's most trusted adviser.

The title alone easily sunk all the other qualifications the man named Jo Hahn-Sung possessed into insignificance.

From the huge-scale national defense business supported by the

likes of Griffins and a Kraken, to creating artifacts; from Orc's miraculous weapons to Mana Tattoos, etc, etc – all of them, indispensable abilities that the current world could not do without.

If one were to call the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong as the true icon of innovation in the modern Wizardry, then Kim Sae-Jin should be seen as the symbol of the modern world itself.

It was all very strange.

Now normally, the public came down hard on those folks who earned a good deal of wealth and political power through their Traits only. However, Kim Sae-Jin was the only exception to that strict rule.

Maybe, that was due to the 'special' circumstances – currently, Boss Monsters appeared several times a month so if there was no Kim Sae-Jin, the country of Korea would've ceased to exist in this world a long time ago.

Without him, there would not be the Orc's weapons to satisfy the demands for quality armaments by the Knights, not to mention those artifacts that could increase the chances of their survival by 90%, either.

And also, it was the same sort of story for the Griffins, responsible for drastically reducing the amount of time required for the dispatched Knights to arrive on the scene – introduction of Griffins that could figuratively arrive virtually as soon as being dispatched, was referred to as 'revolution' in policing – as well as the worldwide defense service that raised the status of Korea internationally, the Kraken.

Kim Sae-Jin was an existence that burned like the light coming from a lone guiding star within this dangerous and treacherous world.

For a man like that to enter the business of Wizard Towers...

Now that was the advent of an unexpected calamity for all potential competitors.

"I heard the rumours of the Vice Tower Lord Heming sending in his resume over that side."

The Seoul Tower Director creased his forehead. The more he thought about it, the more irritated he got. That bat-like son of a gun...

"...The Vice Tower Lord Heming tendered his resignation yesterday."

"Hah, based on what? Surely, he hadn't heard anything concrete from them yet."

"According to the Tower Lord, he said he will bet on him walking away a winner with this move when he resigned from his post. Apparently."

"...Winning? Sounds more like gambling."

The Tower Director's sigh clung to the car window's glass and became a sheen of white frost. Although it was definitely Spring, the temperature was still on the colder side.

"Oh well. The projections for the future should be rosy for them, right?"

".....Indeed, yes. The only demerit is them only having 100 or so grimoires, but 25 of them happen to be books that not even an entire year's worth of research into a single volume will be enough to determine their true value..."

The true worth of a grimoire wasn't simply about 'learning a single magic spell contained within'.

No, the most prominent meaning of its existence was all to do with creating other types of spells, by applying the logic and composition of the original spell contained within the pages of a grimoire.

Considering that point alone, no one could assign any arbitrary value to those grimoires written by the revolutionary genius, the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong. With a single volume of his work, 10 grimoires with different spells could be created. However, within the new Wizard Tower, it held all 25 volumes, so it was only a matter of time before the collection grew into 250 books, then to 2500 books...

"Mm?"

It was then. The Seoul Wizard Tower's Director spotted a man watching the ribbon cutting ceremony from afar. He seemed familiar – sculpted physique, sleek and long legs; strong jawline and a sharp nose; even though he wore a pair of sunglasses and a mask, there was no way his handsome visage could be hidden away.

The Director had seen that face hundreds, thousands of times before, so he instantly recognised the man. It was a secret no one else had any clue of, but the Tower Director 'Joseph Jin' just so happened to be one of Kim Sae-Jin's most ardent fans out there.

"....Wait for a second."

The Tower Director hurriedly opened the car's door and approached that man. That man tilted his head in confusion when an unknown person came up to him.

"By any chance, are you Mister Kim Sae-Jin?"

Just under his sunglasses, signs of panic could be seen.

*

Kim Sae-Jin talked about various things with the Director of Seoul Wizard Tower who had quite unexpectedly managed to spot him. And unlike the popular belief that everyone from a Wizard Tower were egocentric fools with too much pride, the Director was actually quite a principled man.

Their conversation went well and Sae-Jin even found his

dignified attitude likeable, even – all of that was due to the man's passion clearly imbued within the way he gestured and talked.

"Here. It's a present." (Sae-Jin)

So, Sae-Jin gave away the thing he brought along to use as a PR material today.

"What is it?"

The Tower Director fixed his frameless glasses and took a closer look at the book given to him. There was nothing written on the cover, other than the alphabets and numbers "No. 26".

Number 26, 26th, the number being 26...

While saying the same thing over and over again, the Tower Director belatedly realised what this was and his expression changed into one of pure panic.

"This, this is....?!"

"Please, use it well. There are only 17 of this 26th grimoire in the world – 18, if you count that one as well." (Sae-Jin)

Kim Sae-Jin spoke as he smiled. The 26th grimoire strided the boundary existing between magic and sorcery – it featured 'Meteor', a spell that would've never been revived in the modern world if it weren't for the Bathory's knowledge on sorcery and the Leviathan's Mana Body combining their might together.

This powerful legendary spell that occupied the top spot in the fire-based element magic, would no doubt leave behind a huge crater in the world of magic very soon.

"Uh... Uh, uh..... But, h, how can I receive something this valuable..."

The hands of the Tower Director were shaking like leaves.

"Please, take it. There aren't that many Wizards who can learn this spell around the world anyway." (Sae-Jin) Sae-Jin deliberately chose an attacking magic for his new grimoire. He hoped that this would help at least a little bit during the Kim Yu-Sohn-prophesied 'the Great Calamity of Monsters' in the future.

Fearing that Vampires might get their hands on it and abuse the spell, Sae-Jin was planning to select 17 Wizard Towers that had Tower Lords capable of learning this Meteor spell and personally hand it over to them. However, not one Korean Wizard Tower was included in his original plan. But well, another copy could be made any time, so it wasn't a problem.

"Please, take it. Well then, I should get going." (Sae-Jin)

"Eh? Ah, t, thank you very much!! Actually, I, I'm a big fan of yours!"

"Really? In that case, thank you for your support." (Sae-Jin)

Kim Sae-Jin lightly tapped the shoulders of the heavilytrembling Director, and headed towards the ribbon cutting ceremony while cutting open a path through the walls of reporters like an unstoppable tank.

When a tall man suddenly barged his way through, inevitably reporters began spitting out their dissatisfied remarks.

And so, when he arrived around the middle of the way, Kim Sae-Jin removed the sunglasses and stared at Yu Baek-Song.

Since he didn't tell her he was planning to show up, panic was quickly overtaking her expressions as the countless camera lenses turned towards him.

He walked confidently within the path created by the reporters. While thinking about trivial things, such as wondering if this was what Moses was feeling during that famous moment, he walked next to Yu Sae-Jung and took his spot there. Then, he gazed at her and formed the brightest smile he had ever worn until now.

"I'm sure some of them will notice with this much?" (Sae-Jin)

".....Awoo, really now. You should've told me beforehand, you know." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Yu Sae-Jung spoke in a fake criticising voice, yet her face was blossoming with a huge smile.

Thanks to Kim Sae-Jin's unexpected arrival, the ceremony was a roaring success.

"The Vampire Lord's whereabouts might be deep underground," said Rhosrahdel.

His voice lacked energy. Also, both his eyes were blackened, and almost half of his hair had been plucked out. It seemed that he had to pay a heavy price for ruining Bathory's speech during the exhibition's final show.

"Underground where?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

Yi Hye-Rin handed over a boiled egg as she asked. With a practiced hand, Rhosrahdel massaged his eyes with the egg.

"Under the Gangwon Province's Monster field. Remember the place that got created when two Fissures overlapped each other and the earth's crust got distorted?" (Rhosrahdel)

"Ah!! That place where Mana couldn't be used at all?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

As if she had recalled it, Yi Hye-Rin spoke up while clapping her hands. Hearing this, Kim Yu-Rin's face too began drowning in memories. Well, that was the place where she got to meet the Orc for the first time, after all. (TL: No, mister author, it's not, but I'll just leave you to your own forgetfulness...)

"Right. Apparently, the Lord is performing research underground with his most faithful retainers." (Rhosrahdel)

"What kind of a research?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

"I don't know. They are doing something, alright." (Rhosrahdel)

".....Guild Master? What should we do now?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin asked Sae-Jin while looking at him. Sae-Jin thought for a while, before shifting his gaze to Kim Sun-Ho. Kim Sun-Ho passed the baton over to Joo Ji-Hyuk. Then, Joo Ji-Hyuk passed it onto....

Well, the person at the end of the chain of stares turned out to be Kim Yu-Rin after all. She sighed out grandly.

"Ha-ah..."

"Can't be helped, really. Captain's the only one with enough experience on planning and conducting raids amongst us here." (Yi Hye-Rin)

"I get it, I get it. Let's take a look at the map first." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin took a look at the map of the interior Rhosrahdel brought along. The most eye-catching thing on it was the passage displayed, and it was located quite close to the East Sea's coastline. They might be able to utilise the Leviathan's strength at this rate.

Two methods immediately came up on Kim Yu-Rin's mind once she thought about using this lengthy passage to enter the base. They could bore a hole on the ground and poke their heads in, or quietly infiltrate...

Rhosrahdel added a few words as she deliberated.

"Ah, I forgot. Bathory told me to contact her as soon as the planning is complete. She said she will help." (Rhosrahdel)

"Really? Then, that's fin... Wait. Didn't you say that the Lord can 'see everything'? He probably has seen you coming here to meet us. Doesn't that mean we are busted already?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

Yi Hye-Rin asked.

"Ah. That only applies to the Vampires that had sworn the oath." (Rhosrahdel)

"The oath?"

"It happened really a long time ago. Remember the Vampire cleansing that happened in the past? Vampires found out that it was definitely an inside job. So, those who somehow survived the cleansing, wanted to make sure the traitors pay the appropriate price, but well, since there weren't a lot of Vampires remaining, someone cooked up the idea of 'Let's not kill our own kins when there's so little number to begin with, and instead, swear an oath of never betraying our kind and entrust our lives to the Lord...' However, I am a child born after the racial cleansing had come to an end. So, I am not affected by this blood oath." (Rhosrahdel)

"A child...?!" (Yi Hye-Rin)

Yi Hye-Rin stared at Rhosrahdel with eyes that screamed contempt and her failure to understand his claims.

"Don't be like that, since I'm the youngest of everyone here. Both Knight Kim Yu-Rin and Wizard Hazeline have shot past their 30s already, no? I'm still in my 20s, you know."

The two people who got dragged into the conversation unexpectedly began gritting their teeth. A violent desire to murder burned fiercely in their eyes. Rhosrahdel whistled nonchalantly and avoided their eyes.

"But still. Vampires would die from that by getting caught in it if they are unlucky, right? Even Nosferatus?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Nope, that's not it either. I hear that the Lord is way too busy doing his research underground that he has no time to check and stuff." (Rhosrahdel)

"So, in other words, there is no problem, is that it? Well, then how about we do it like this? Everyone, please listen to this..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin began explaining the plan she cooked up in this short amount of time. It was quite a bit complex plan, too. And this plan required the presences of excavators, the Leviathan, the Kraken, etc, etc. However, once everyone heard of it, it sounded quite doable, so they ended up nodding their heads in approval.

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"It's good, Captain." (Yi Hye-Rin)
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"As expected. It's not for nothing people chant 'Kim Yu-Rin, Kim Yu-Rin' all the time."

"Haha, you are overestimating me. Well then, Guild Master, should we go with this plan?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

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"Yes, let's." (Sae-Jin)
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Sae-Jin gave his permission.

Tting!!

It was then, the elevator door to the conference room opened up, and a woman with white hair that kinda, sorta resembled a middle schooler belatedly arrived.

"Here I am. What's up?" (Yu Baek-Song)

"Oh, Miss Yu Baek-Song. Please take a seat. There's a plan we need to explain to you." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin proceeded to explain the plan once more to Yu Baek-Song. However, the little white tiger suddenly tilted her head in confusion, and then, poured the proverbial cold water on their parade.

"Why the heck is it so complicated? If you know the coordinates, you can just enter with the sorcery, no? Hey Kim Sae-Jin, that sorcery thing you used to teleport us, can't you use that again?" (Yu Baek-Song)

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How come they haven't thought of that simple idea?

A thick silence mixed with self mockery descended upon the

conference room. (ED: Haha, good going, Yu Baek-Song!)< 45. The Entry (1) > Fin.

Chapter 154: The Entry (2)

- It has been now confirmed that the excerpt from the grimoire number 26, written personally by the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong, does mention 'balls of flame descending from the distant skies'. Opinions of experts in the Wizarding community are divided regarding those words that invoke the images of the spell 'Meteor', but even until now, the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong has not revealed the true name of the spell yet.
- This new Bangbae-Dong grimoire that has caused yet another huge stir in the world is planned to be distributed to the Dawn & TM Wizard Tower first; experts believe this will only serve to increase the number of Wizards buttering up to Dawn & TM Tower...

Things were still chaotic for the media and TV stations. The interest and fervor of the Wizards directed towards the new grimoire were just that huge. It was understandable, since the book was rumoured to contain the recreation of a certain legendary spell, after all.

Whatever the case might have been, thanks to this grimoire alone, the number of applicants for the Dawn & TM's Wizard Tower reached 6785, which excluded the applicants from other countries. If one considered the fact that the total number of Wizards in Korea did not exceed 80000, it was indeed an enormous figure – but even then, that was the figure with the Wizards below C class and judged to be lacking in potential and talent were eliminated from the counting process. In other words, the remaining ones were the cream of the crop.

And so, Yu Sae-Jung was spending everyday on the proverbial cloud nine after getting the acknowledgment from her grandfather for her business acumen – but well, Sae-Jin himself wasn't all that interested in it, personally speaking.

"Still haven't received the coordinates yet?" (Sae-Jin)

A meeting was being held in the secret conference room located below the Guild's HQ.

"Please wait for a moment. I have received the coordinates but, as for the mental images of the interior... Ah, I've received them, master!" (Rhosrahdel) (TL: For the record, Rhosrahdel isn't calling Sae-Jin master as in Guild Master, but as his "owner". Hence, I didn't use capital M.)

Rhosrahdel smiled brightly at Sae-Jin. However, the title this young Vampire used to call Sae-Jin got on his nerves a bit, so his forehead creased up quite deeply.

"How many times do I have to tell you not to call me master?" (Sae-Jin)

"If it's not that, then how should I address you? Since I'm not a Guild member, I can't even call you Guild Master..." (Rhosrahdel)

Rhosrahdel complained while revealing a bit of his real intent. However, it was Yi Hye-Rin who suppressed that sly request to join the Guild.

Slap!!

That was the sound of a palm smashing into a person's back.

"Stop muttering nonsense and tell us the coordinates already." (Yi Hye-Rin)

"Ah-euh, that hurts. Seriously... Fine, fine." (Rhosrahdel)

Rhosrahdel jotted down the coordinates on a piece of paper, and then transmitted the mental images of the cavern's interior to Sae-Jin via their link. Sae-Jin closed his eyes and studied the interior for a bit, memorising good spots where they could hide in.

"Is that okay, master?" (Rhosrahdel)

"...Yeah, sure. Good enough." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin opened his eyes with a long sigh. At the same time, Rhosrahdel's face went rigid. It seemed that he had received a new telepathic message from Bathory.

"What?" (Sae-Jin)

"Well, master." (Rhosrahdel)

"...Stop calling me a master already." (Sae-Jin)

"Bathory says to come over to where she is." (Rhosrahdel)

"Okay, then. Get going." (Sae-Jin)

"No, I mean, not me... She wants master to come over." (Rhosrahdel)

Sae-Jin tilted his head.

"Why so suddenly?" (Sae-Jin)

"I've no clue." (Rhosrahdel)

After receiving the summons, Sae-Jin went to the former underground city of Nosferatus which now belonged to Bathory.

"May 6th? Cool. I'll help you." (Bathory)

"....And how do you plan to do that, exactly?" (Sae-Jin)

"I'll call out all the retainers working with the Lord on his research or whatever, telling them there's something urgent we need to take care of." (Bathory)

She gave out a rather insincere answer.

"And how will you call them out?" (Sae-Jin)

"I'll take care of that, so you don't have to worry your little mind, mkay? Heum~, hmm~~." (Bathory)

Her attitude was way to discourteous. Sae-Jin's forehead creased up automatically after seeing her busy messing around with her smartphone, considering that she was the one who wanted him here.

"What are you so busy with?" (Sae-Jin)

"Oh, I'm just checking out a couple of articles online. These ants are so adorable, you know? Hey, here, this number next to this thumb-up sign, that's telling me the number of ants agreeing with this opinion praising me, right?" (Bathory)

She pointed at the phone's screen and asked him. There was a comment section attached to an article praising Emil Rerheu's martial prowess, and 7300 were agreeing with it, while 3400 weren't.

"Yeah, correct." (Sae-Jin)

"So, that means 7300 likes Emil Rerheu. Good. But what about these 3400? Can you found out who they are?" (Bathory)

"What will you do if you find them?" (Sae-Jin)

"Kill them, of course." (Bathory)

""

All those anonymous somebodies living somewhere were now in danger of being murderised by the origin of all things evil, just because they touched the wrong spot on the screen of their phones...

"Hey, I am just kidding you. It's a joke. So stop forming such a serious expression, you idiot." (Bathory)

Bathory smirked and put her phone down, then handed a box over to Sae-Jin. It was an ancient and old-fashioned box that wouldn't have been out of place if it were found within the pages of Old Testament.

"And this is?" (Sae-Jin)

"The Lord's weakness is inside. It's nothing much, just a gift wishing for your success, is all." (Bathory)

"....A weakness?" (Sae-Jin)

"Yup. Even if he is the Lord, because he's so old now, all his senses, including eyesight, hearing, whatever, are in steep decline. Even the might of his 'eyes that see everything' is no longer what it used to be. Well~, even if you fail to carry out your plans, I'd love it if you still manage to get rid of that eye for me. It's so annoying, see?" (Bathory)

Sae-Jin cautiously opened the lid, trying not to damage the box. A silver knife glistened coldly within the black interior.

"Silver?" (Sae-Jin)

"Right. But it's not a regular silver, nope. It's the silver refined by my homeworld's much more powerful sunlight, you know? Now normally, a Vampire has two weaknesses – sunlight and silver. This here is the thing combining both of those." (Bathory)

"If that's the case..." (Sae-Jin)

Grasping the knife, Sae-Jin glared at Bathory with the unreadable light in his eyes. After sensing his intent, Bathory's eyes arched slightly. But she wasn't angry or anything like that.

"Even if those are Vampire's weaknesses, we can't even feel them when we are young and full of vitality. But the Lord is different. He's really old, you see. If you cut him with that knife, his flesh will start rotting away. And he won't be able to regenerate himself even with a single cut." (Bathory)

"Hmph."

Sae-Jin wielded the silver knife this way and that. It had a really plain exterior. It looked like he should slice steak with it instead of a person's flesh – and even then, since 'rare' was too tough, maybe 'well-done' instead. (TL: Uh, no, mister Author, 'rare' is softer to chew, actually...)

After watching him for a bit with a satisfied smile on her face, Bathory added some cautionary words as well. "Hey kid. You shouldn't take this too lightly. The Lord has achieved the peak of all peaks in Chimera engineering, you know?"

And with that, she poured in all her focus back on the smartphone. Seeing her fingers quickly fidgeting away, Sae-Jin wondered whether she was trying to manipulate the public sentiment all by herself or not.

Sae-Jin smirked and spoke.

"I'm leaving." (Sae-Jin)

""

Bathory didn't bother to reply – only the sounds of that unique SFX of the phone's onscreen keyboard being pressed echoed in the silence.

The date was set ten days from now, on 20th of April. (TL: Eh? But what happened to May 6th? This author can't even remember what he wrote a couple of pages ago...)

Although he acted all relaxed and ready, the pressure emanating from the title 'Vampire Lord' wasn't something Sae-Jin could carelessly receive at all. Unable to do anything about the heaviness weighing down on his heart, Sae-Jin ended up taking a stroll through the underground village of Nosferatus.

Set up next to the Goblin's village, the base for the Nosferatus actually was quite beautiful to look at. An old-school castle, seemingly plucked straight out from medieval times, stood tall enough to pierce the ceilings, and the more 'normal' looking stone and brick houses surrounded it.

A 'city' built within the darkness, a spitting image of their home back in their original world. To Vampires that hated sunlight, this might as well be their one true paradise.

"You will succeed." (Lillia)

While he was quietly taking it all in, Lillia approached Sae-Jin and handed over a mug of coffee.

Did he look that troubled? Sae-Jin forced out a smile.

"I should hope so." (Sae-Jin)

"No, you will succeed. The Lord will die, and everyone will return safe and sound. Mister Sae-Jin will return home, reminisce and write on his diary – it'll be like that sort of... a happy ending. Of course, there should be some other complications, though." (Lillia)

An imperceptible smile spread on Sae-Jin's lips. He sipped on the coffee and asked her about something he was curious about.

"By the way, how's the life down here?" (Sae-Jin)

It was impossible for Vampires to absorb nutrition through any other means except through drinking blood. It was because, besides the mouth and oesophagus, a Vampire did not possess other digestive organs. They were born with a completely different structure of the body, as well as the methods of survival, compared to regular human beings.

Maybe, it was an inevitability that Vampires would end up being the enemy of mankind.

However, Sae-Jin thought that in the modern world, there was no such a thing as inevitability and all that.

The current Earth and the world which the level of science hadn't even caught up to Earth's Middle Ages – and where the Vampires originated from – couldn't even be compared at all. No matter how much magic and Mana rampaged about, the accumulated pool of scientific knowledge still managed to exist in the modern world.

Not only the science didn't get swept aside via the advent of Mana, it survived, and even marched further forward thanks to injection of magic and Mana as the basis for technology to revolutionise.

That was why, there was no 'impossibility' in the modern world.

No, there were only 'the things that haven't been tried yet' and 'the things that have been tried before'.

So, Sae-Jin decided to come up with new sources of nutrients for Vampire's exclusive consumption. This idea came about after realising the simple truth about Vampires being able to drink potions.

And that vague outline of an idea finally bore fruit in the form of a prototype liquid after six months of arduous research.

A magical liquid that sent all the necessary nutrients to the entire body as soon it was drunk.

With this much, Vampires should no longer feel the disgust towards drinking bovine or swine blood.

Of course, Wizards capable of handling Mana were required during the manufacturing process, but as it was mentioned before, there were 6785 applicants wishing to join TM's Wizard Tower, so...

And Nosferatus went on a drive to improve their diet with the aid of this drink.

"There are a few of us who find it difficult to adjust, but it's better than expected. We're moving forward nicely." (Lillia)

"That's a relief to hear. I'm planning to add the flavour of 'meat', something I hear you have never tasted before until now, so please do look forward to it." (Sae-Jin)

Well, a few Wizards might have to slave away like crazy, though.

"Fuhut. That's a nice news to hear. Yes, I'll look forward to it." (Lillia)

"Chief Lillia! Over here, please!"

From somewhere, a man's loud shout came towards them. Lillia smiled after hearing that shout containing that person's scent, and stood up from her seat. (TL: Yeah, I also don't get it. But I still TLed the sentence literally.)

"Then, I shall be on my way. Mister Sae-Jin should also return home – although, it's fine if you want to stay for a while longer, too." (Lillia)

Her voice was gentle and kind.

He followed suit and got up as well.

"Sure, take care. I should also get going now." (Sae-Jin)

Lillia left, and Sae-Jin headed off to the exit located on the opposite side to the underground village.

Then, a certain thought popped up in his head.

"...How did she know that I keep a diary?"

However, his legs moved again towards the exit after he told himself that her words simply meant those everyday routines, like wash your face before going to bed, etc, etc.

The giant called time took hefty strides forward and before long, ten days flew by at the blink of an eye; the date today was 20th of April.

The day they were waiting for.

The members about to participate in this plan gathered in the underground conference room while decked out in expensive artifacts like some kind of Christmas trees.

"Hang on, wouldn't each one of us reach a value of close to a billion dollars, dressed like this?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

Yi Hye-Rin muttered loudly as she rubbed the belt-style highclass artifact. Most likely, she tried to diffuse the tension with her question.

"A billion is too much, so maybe 500 million?" (Yu Baek-Song)

"Combine Mana Tattoos to that and any one of us shoots past a billion, easy. I mean, the inflation nowadays is so crazy during these uncertain times." (Kim Sun-Ho)

Yu Baek-Song and Kim Sun-Ho replied. Sae-Jin chuckled a little bit, before changing into the Leviathan.

"Let's cut the chit chat and get going. Please gather around." (Sae-Jin)

"Wha? What the?!"

"You can speak even in the Leviathan's appearance?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin asked out aloud after hearing the Leviathan's charmingly baritone voice.

"Yes, I can. But let's talk about that later and gather around me. In order to raise the accuracy, you guys need to stick close to me." (Sae-Jin)

Remembering the first time they moved via instant transmission, where their faces ended up slamming into the ground, the members quickly sneaked up next to Sae-Jin's position. And then, they slowly closed their eyes while feeling the surprisingly soft and squishy scales of the Leviathan.

Sae-Jin also closed his eyes. After recalling the coordinates once more, he also recalled the images of the cavern's interior he memorised earlier, as well.

"Here we go." (Sae-Jin)

Suddenly, a strong dizziness swept by his brain.

But that was only for a short moment. The party staggered while opening their eyes. The thick darkness welcomed them.

Sae-Jin reverted back to his human appearance while looking at the far end of the lengthy cavern. No matter how powerful the Leviathan was, it was simply far too slow outside the body of water.

"Whew.... Okay, let's go. From now on, Knight Kim Yu-Rin will take the lead." (Sae-Jin)

"Right. Everyone, Be very quiet and follow me. Remain mindful of how you breathe, even." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Following right behind Kim Yu-Rin, the party walked forward in the darkness. Not even five minutes had passed by, yet their faces were soaked in sweat from the taut tension gripping them tightly.

And another hour passed by like that.

SFX for strange vibrations

An ominous tremor spread into their ears. Kim Yu-Rin was hurriedly trying to shout out in alarm, but...

But before she could, the darkness bleached out and the space got flipped on her.

Kim Yu-Rin had to close her eyes for a moment and reopen them due the blinding whiteness.

The pure white that tormented her eyes had been replaced by a deep navy blue. Worse still, she couldn't spot the rest of the party that should've been there with her in this new space.

That was, with the exception of Kim Sae-Jin.

With a flustered face, Sae-Jin spoke while looking at Kim Yu-Rin.

"Looks like the Lord has caught onto us." (Sae-Jin)

Kim Yu-Rin surveyed the surroundings with a frustrated face.

"Seems like it." (Kim Yu-Rin)

It was right then.

The Lord's voice reverberated through the cavern.

Two people present heard it clearly, the words....

- An Orc, and a human. Welcome.
- ...The words uttered out by the Lord.
- < 45. The Entry (2) > Fin.

Chapter 155: The Entry (3)

- The Orc and the human, is it. I've enjoyed witnessing the destruction of my creation by your hands.

"...?"

Kim Yu-Rin's head tilted sideways.

She heard the Lord's voice just fine, but failed to understand the meaning of his words. The Orc and the human the Vampire Lord had mentioned – well, the human was here, so where was the Orc? She took a look behind her, but beside the thick darkness, no such thing as an Orc existed nearby.

While observing the changes in her mood from the side, Sae-Jin wiped the cold sweat off from his forehead.

- And what brings you to my abode?

Fortunately for Sae-Jin, the Lord's dignified voice changed the topic quickly enough. Feeling hurried now, Sae-Jin tried to move towards the direction of the voice quickly, but Kim Yu-Rin didn't follow suit. No, she instead reached out and grabbed Sae-Jin's wrist firmly in order to stop him, before throwing a question at the Lord.

- "What did you mean by that just now?" (Kim Yu-Rin)
- Regarding which matter?
- "Just now, you said 'the Orc and the human'. 'Humans' are here, but where is this Orc you mentioned?" (Kim Yu-Rin)
 - Hmm...

The Lord's lengthy and low-pitched murmuring seemed to stick to the walls of the cavern like some sticky glue.

- "Answer me." (Kim Yu-Rin)
- Although I did not expect you to address me with honorifics...

Still, don't you think your attitude is a little troublesome, human?

It seemed that the Lord didn't care for Kim Yu-Rin's attitude at all.

"......Hah."

Her face hardened rather coldly. How dare he seek decorum after he drove the world to the brink of destruction? She gritted her teeth and pulled out Gungnir.

"In that case, allow me to beat you up and make you spit it out." (Kim Yu-Rin)

- As expected, even though the world may be different, humans are still arrogant and conceited...

"Shut up. Let's go, Guild Master." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin shouted out confrontationally and took the lead. Sae-Jin quietly followed after her.

So, the two people walked in the passage while scything through the darkness. The more they walked, the stronger the sensation of the passage widening became.

For sure, the interior of the cavern was indeed changing. To be more specific, the narrow and lengthy shape of the terrain was gradually opening up.

And they must have walked nonstop for the next hour or so.

Finally, the two of them were able to step into a huge open space.

"Huh. Really now. Just how much further should we keep walking?" (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin scratched the back of his neck and groaned. Kim Yu-Rin stared at him with a gentle smile, then spoke to him while surveying this huge open area.

"But still, I am relieved." (Kim Yu-Rin)

".....About?" (Sae-Jin)

"Seeing that the Lord is within this passage, it's most likely our path is the correct one. And out of everyone in the team, we're the strongest, after all." (Kim Yu-Rin)

As expected of Kim Yu-Rin and her selfless personality, she believed it was a fortunate thing for them to face the strong and difficult opponent instead of others. Sae-Jin chuckled and his hand automatically rose up towards her head. Then, he went Oops and stopped himself in the middle. The old habit of the Hero Orc, patting her head every now and then, almost broke out by mistake.

"Excuse me...?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

And the eyes of Kim Yu-Rin staring at him also widened in real time as well. He quickly withdrew his hand and coughed awkwardly.

"Ah, my apologies... For you being a bit of a shorty." (Sae-Jin)

...And he tried to turn it around with a bit of humour.

"....I'm 168 centimetres tall. If this is too short for you, then how tall should a woman be?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin narrowed her eyes and complained. But seeing her cheeks redden a bit, he couldn't help but wonder if she liked being treated like a young kid. Of course, he threw away that idea quickly enough, though.

He pointed towards the far end of the passage and spoke.

"I am just kidding with you. Regardless, let's hurry. It's not good to be too tense, but it's also equally bad being too rela..." (Sae-Jin)

KHUUOONG!!

Before he could finish his sentence, the entire terrain shook violently.

Kwahng! Kwahng!

Right after that, powerful shock waves spread out as if something was trying to break out from the underground.

"Get ready for battle!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin's occupational habit reared its head again. She shoved Sae-Jin behind her and unsheathed the sword.

Kwajeeck!!

At the same time, the surface of the floor cracked open, and something massive climbed out from the gap. First to show up were two hands the size of an adult person, and just behind those huge hands, a pair of heads with their own pairs of blood-red eyes attached could be seen.

It was an Ogre.

Of course, it was on a different level compared to a normal Ogre. First of all, there was the thing with the number of its heads, and next, the shape of one of the heads it possessed. One head was that of an regular Ogre, but the other one just so happened to be that of a Cerberus, the guardian of hell's gate.

"Looks like it received a head from an annoying guard dog." (Kim Yu-Rin) (TL: troll face)

Kim Yu-Rin's expression crumpled. The Monster really was that disgusting to look at. But still, she couldn't overlook its potential power, now that a Cerberus and an Ogre had been combined into one. She gripped her Gungnir real tightly while glaring at the Ogre.

Shareureureuk-

And as she was searching for the Monster's weakness, a transparent and light beam-like energy descended on top of her head.

"...Mm?"

She even forgot about her nervousness and exclaimed out. When that spectral light entered her body, her entire being felt much lighter than before, and the flow of Mana within her blood vessels received a huge boost.

She turned to look at the person responsible for this, Kim Sae-Jin. He replied her quizzical look with a warm smile that even made her fluster just a little bit.

"It's a buff spell. Please go ahead. I'll support you with magic from the rear." (Sae-Jin)

He then morphed into the Leviathan Form.

"Thank you." (Kim Yu-Rin)

A Leviathan had her back – deriving the utmost confidence from that fact alone, Kim Yu-Rin lunged towards the Ogre.

SFX for the Ogre's roar

The Ogre roared out and violently swung its jet-black club.

Khoung!!

A sword emitting the brilliant golden light clashed with an unbreakable blunt instrument made out of black metal. An indescribable explosion resounded out from the contact point. A huge crater caved in on the ground, and from within the thick, choking dust cloud, seeds of flame sparkled threateningly.

Only a single strike caused such a memorable scene.

Soon enough, though, the dust cloud cleared away and the result became also clear for all to see.

And that was the Ogre and his missing right arm, its black metal club also gone for good.

Kim Yu-Rin pounced on the suffering Ogre that was in agony after losing its arm. Her whole body felt like it was two, no, three times purer and overflowing with strength, thanks to Sae-Jin's incomparable buff magic.

This feeling, she wanted to keep feeling it for the rest of her life.

The appearance of the Two-Headed Ogre was merely the beginning. But they could defeat other Monsters without too much issues. According to Kim Yu-Rin, it was because of their 'fantastic teamwork', apparently. Nominally it was a teamwork, but all Sae-Jin did was to support her with buff magic, actually.

Of course, the level of Sae-Jin's spell was way too high to label it as a simple 'support magic'. As the 'sorcery' formed the foundation for this difficult buff spell, Sae-Jin had to morph into the Leviathan Form just in order to maintain it. And its effects were just as excellent, too.

Anyways.

As they eliminated various Chimeras that tried to block their path and continued on forward, they eventually encountered a rather suspicious-looking door.

Even with a single, casual look, it was an old-fashioned and dignified door that screamed "The Final Boss is here!!"

Strange figures painted in white colour decorated the black door.

"....Shall we?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin asked, and Sae-Jin wordlessly grabbed the door handle.

I wanted to open it, though, Kim Yu-Rin lightly complained and nodded her head. Sae-Jin chuckled slightly and pushed the door open.

SFX for the creaky sound of a door opening

The door issued a worn-out creak as it opened. Past the doorway, the very first thing they spotted was an old man wearing a black robe that seemed tattered and dishevelled. Then, they saw his energy-less drooping shoulders and the white eyes that had lost vitality a long time ago.

He was blind as well.

"His eyes..." (Sae-Jin)

Only then, Sae-Jin realised why the Lord failed to show himself even though Nosferatus were openly rebelling, as well as when Bathory showed signs of suspicious behaviour.

A leader of the organisation that couldn't be of any help for the said organisation was no longer acknowledged as the leader. There were only two possible endings waiting for such a person – one, get eaten by the challenger, or two, retire on his own volition.

"I heard you possessed eyes that could see everything." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin taunted and pointed the tip of her Gungnir at the Lord's neck.

The Lord stared at the two of them with those eyes that couldn't see nor reflect anything. However, although they might have lost their original functions, it sure felt like his eyes could still decipher the truths of all things regardless.

"As you can see, my eyes have lost their clarity already." (The Vampire Lord)

The Lord's phlegm-laden voice sounded calm and stable, yet the tone indicated he was sternly admonishing the pair of intruders before him. That was quite evident from the smouldering rage hidden in his calm appearance.

"....That means, we can get rid of you quite easily, no?" (Sae-Jin)

This time, Sae-Jin spoke up. He grasped the Bathory's gift tightly and got ready to pounce on the Lord. However, Kim Yu-Rin stretched her arm out and stopped him. Her face said that she somehow managed to remember just now the question she had nearly forgotten about.

"There's something I'm curious about." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"And what would that be?" (The Vampire Lord)

In that moment, Sae-Jin's face became dyed in panic. The question she wanted to ask the Lord was quite obvious, really. Obviously...

"You clearly said, the Orc and the human when we came here. Are you saying that the Orc is here too? And which Orc are you referring to, when you said the Orc?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

""

The Lord maintained his silence. Meanwhile, Sae-Jin changed back into the Leviathan Form. He was thinking of firing off the Mana cannon and killing the Lord before he opened his mouth.

Unfortunately, though – that ended up being the bad move on his part.

"Indeed, a measly human with a Trait that allows you to transform into many other lifeforms. Seeing it with my own eyes, it is truly interesting." (The Vampire Lord)

The Lord's words seemed to strike home way too accurately for a blind man.

"Oh, the Lady Knight, what are you even talking about? The Orc resides within that man. I have remembered his appearance especially so, because he was in his Orc form when he slew my Chimera. That is why I have referred to this man as the Orc." (The Vampire Lord)

" "

Instantly, all of Kim Yu-Rin's movement ceased up.

SFX for the sound of winds blowing

A cold and ominous wind blew in from the wide open doorway. As if that coldness had woken her up, Kim Yu-Rin turned her head towards Sae-Jin's direction. Within her enlarged eyes, several emotions, such as confusion, surprise, a sense of betrayal, etc, etc, swirled about crazily.

Even though Sae-Jin could feel her eyes staring at him, he continued to wordlessly study the Lord.

As the silence flowed thickly between the two, the Lord eventually opened his mouth again.

"Perchance, she did not know? I wonder why." (The Vampire Lord)

".....Just, what does this mean?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

She finally opened her mouth, too, and asked. However, the recipient of that question wasn't the Vampire Lord, but Kim Sae-Jin.

Only then, Sae-Jin turned his head towards her and met her eyes.

He could see the reflection of the Leviathan within her trembling pupils. Suddenly, he thought he looked disgusting for some reason. So, he reverted back to his human appearance.

He gritted his teeth and shifted his glare back at the Lord, and then spoke up.

"He's attempting to drive a wedge between us. Do not be mislead." (Sae-Jin)

"Drive a wedge? What can you possibly mean by that?" (The Vampire Lord)

Unfortunately, the Lord interfered. With an insidious and sly smile on his face, to boot.

"Oh, the Lady Knight. Truth always leaves crumbs of evidence behind. And you should have been faintly aware of those evidence crumbs by now." (The Vampire Lord)

Kim Yu-Rin's eyes remained fixed on Sae-Jin while the Lord's words entered her ears.

And so, she began recalling things one by one.

Her prior suspicion regarding the small insignia placed on the

Orc Blacksmith's weapons that Sae-Jin had crafted, that could be also found on the Hero Orc's weapon; that strangely firm belief the Orc had in Kim Sae-Jin; those habits Sae-Jin unconsciously exhibited that were so, so similar to that of the Orc; and finally, his Trait where he could change into a Monster...

At the same time, all the questions she held deep inside flooded back out.

All those questions she had suppressed with the single thought, 'it's not possible', bubbled back up to the surface once more.

"Mister Guild Master." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin's face hardened, but she didn't speak any further. She used silence to pressure Sae-Jin.

Should he tell her the truth? But honestly, he felt hesitant to do so. After all, those actions he performed without giving it much thought as the Orc would be seen as him making utter fool out of her from Kim Yu-Rin's perspective.

"Later. There is more important work we need to finish first." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin called up the excuse of 'later', in order to overcome this critical moment. Obviously, they did have a mission to complete here; he grasped the silver knife tightly and started walking towards the Vampire Lord.

"No." (Kim Yu-Rin)

But Kim Yu-Rin proved to be a stubborn customer.

"The story will take too long to finish. We have something to..." (Sae-Jin)

"All I want is one simple answer. It's not going to take long." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Her firmly shut lips and her sharply narrowed eyes – with an expression as grave and serious, something Sae-Jin had never seen

her make before, she continued with her words.

"You, you are the Hero Orc, yes? Your Trait, you can transform into other Forms besides the Leviathan, yes?"

< 45. The Entry (3) > Fin.

Chapter 156: The Entry (4)

Stuck between Kim Yu-Rin busy demanding answers, and the Vampire Lord who was gazing on expectantly, Sae-Jin fell into a dilemma of sorts.

One second, then one minute, valuable time was being wasted away in anxiety.

During this time, the Vampire Lord was 'kind' enough not to attack first and he instead waited for them. It seemed that he didn't think too highly of the current situation's seriousness at all.

Sae-Jin closed his eyes and sighed out grandly. The nervous swallowing from Kim Yu-Rin sounded really loud at that moment.

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"I am....." (Sae-Jin)
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....However, Sae-Jin didn't continue.

Rather, the chilling sound effect of a blade piercing flesh cried out, instead.

The wide-eyed Kim Yu-Rin hurriedly turned her head towards the Lord. A silver knife was buried deeply in his solar plexus.

"Kkeuh-euh.... You dirty scoundrel!" (The Vampire Lord)

The Lord spat out his rage and blood at the same time.

"I was aiming for the heart, though. You somehow dodged." (Sae-Jin)

The knife's flight time was probably less than 0.1 seconds, no more than a blink. But still, fitting for the one holding the title of the Vampire Lord, he twisted his body just in time to avoid getting struck in his heart.

And with this first strike done and dusted now, there was no more room left to hold a conversation. Kim Yu-Rin gritted her teeth and held her Gungnir tightly.

Sae-Jin spoke to her in the meantime.

"Don't forget our real purpose from here onwards, please. I'll tell you everything once this is over." (Sae-Jin)

"That promise, I'll hold you to it." (Kim Yu-Rin)

At the same time, the ground below changed. No, the space itself seemed to warp. The floor they stood on became dyed in blood-red colour, and the Lord, once close enough for them to touch by reaching out, was pulled back to a far off distance, glaring at their direction.

Almost right away, the reddened ground began to literally boil, and giant Monsters rose up one by one.

Even among those, there was one particular creature that caught their attention.

A giant snake-like existence seemingly painted in ash, that was both real and at the same time, not.

The Twilight Spirit.

A demonic creature commonly thought of as the apex of all Undead type Monsters.

That wasn't the only Monster to come out, though. A Two-Headed Ogre, a Crimson Wyvern, Death Knights, etc, etc... Fifteen Monsters that could individually bring an entire city to a standstill appeared and filled up the room.

"Well, this looks like it might get tricky for only the two of us." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin muttered out with a frustrated voice. Sae-Jin shook his head at her declaration, however.

"We just need to endure for a while. There's a parasitic Mana and a powerful poison applied to the blade of that knife. If the Lord is maintaining this space with his Mana, he's not going to last long." (Sae-Jin)

"....In that case, I should help out with the process, then." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin grasped her sword in reverse grip. She was planning to fire off a beam of light in the blink of an eye to kill the Lord. (TL: the raw stated "inverse grip" but Google search returned nothing on that front. So I changed to reverse. Seems a bit wrong, though, so I'm leaving this TL note here.)

On the other hand, Sae-Jin transformed back into the Leviathan and summoned the Kraken to divert the danger away from her.

Just as the Kraken's suction pads stretched out on the ground, with a loud Kwahahaha, Kim Yu-Rin's beam of energy shot forward like a bolt of lightning. The Monsters summoned by the Lord got in the path of the beam to block it with their bodies, but the energy beam simply blasted past all flesh and bones to successfully blow away the Vampire Lord's arm.

Her Trait was set to 'pierce through everything', that was why.

"Kkeuahahck!!"

The Lord's pained scream was the signal; the fifteen summoned Monsters lunged forward. Sae-Jin exhausted over half of his Mana reserve and fired off the Mana cannon, and almost half of the Monsters were killed off on the spot. However, the super-annoying Twilight Spirit and the fleet-footed Death Knights were still fine. They bared fangs and swords instead, thick killing intent fully on display.

"I'll take on that snake-like creature!! The Death Knights are yours!" (Sae-Jin)

"Got it!!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

The Twilight Spirit was a Monster existing on the boundaries of ambiguity, and was both a physical being and not at the same time. In other words, it could freely alter its 'nature' and the characteristics of itself at will. So it could become immaterial to

evade an attack, then become a physical being again to counter.

Such as now.

"Kkheup!"

The snake's tail materialised out of thin air and struck Sae-Jin's stomach.

As he was forced back by some considerable distance, he tried to come up with ways to kill that thing. From what he learned from the Monster bestiary, this Monster couldn't be killed with regular attacks. And the Mana cannon with its limited range wouldn't work on that nimble creature, either.

However, as the Lycanthrope, he could prise out a weakness in it. So, he had to aim for that...

He quickly changed into the Lycanthrope Form. At the same time, a big shadow loomed over his head. A Death Knight's massive sword came down to split his head in half, but Kim Yu-Rin's golden beam of energy deflected it away.

"A Werewolf?! That's, crazy! So, the, plan?!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin asked him while deploying the acrobatic swordsmanship to ward off the Death Knights' attacks.

"Let's kill other Monsters first! We can then go one on one with the Boss Monste....Euhurck!!" (Sae-Jin)

As he was in the middle of his answer, Sae-Jin got hit on the belly by that dang tail again.

KuongKwahng, KuongKwahng!!

Even while he was flung away, countless attacks rained down on him. He felt like his entire body was turning into a meat paste. He got hit, so that hurt like hell, and the pain caused him to get angry.

He activated the Eyes of the Wolf.

The body of the Twilight Spirit as seen through his Eye was as

expected, jet-black, no weaknesses whatsoever. But when he focused his glare where the Monster's heart should be, a faint red spot gradually developed. And so, one single weakness had emerged.

Sae-Jin confidently pounced on the Monster.

"Time to die... Euh-huh-urk!!!" (Sae-Jin)

Too bad, he had forgotten that, although there was a weakness now, he still lacked strength to fight it one on one. Kim Sae-Jin was flung away to a far off distance with a single flick of the Monster's tail.

"Ah-euht!"

At the same time, Kim Yu-Rin's groan could be heard as well. Surprisingly enough, although she was still being buffed with support magic, she used her own strength to defeat three of the five Death Knights surrounding her.

But as a human, it was asking far too much of her martial prowess to contend with five near-Boss level Monsters like the Death Knights. The Kraken was helping out on the side, but ever since Sae-Jin stopped using the Leviathan Form, its might had decreased significantly...

In that moment, the Death Knight's massive sword drew towards the exhausted Kim Yu-Rin's direction.

Sae-Jin hurriedly ran over there and tried to block that swinging sword.

But, it was right then.

The space contracted suddenly, and all the summoned Monsters disappeared.

Just in the nick of time, the Vampire Lord's strength had been exhausted. Two people sighed out in relief and controlled their rough breathing.

However, the Twilight Spirit remained for some reason. The Monster maintained the physical form and as if to protect the Lord, stood in front of him.

"No matter what petty tricks you come up with, you'll still die, so why don't you quietly give up now?" (Sae-Jin)

"Heu... huhuh."

The Lord continued to laugh even after hearing Sae-Jin's taunts. The Twilight Spirit moved to the side of the Lord at the same time. Then, the Lord shoved his hand into the heart of the Monster; the heart was ripped out while spewing out blood everywhere like a fountain.

"What the ...?!"

"This is an existence that shares my blood. I've made it by sacrificing my own soul." (The Vampire Lord)

While muttering the words they couldn't quite comprehend, the Lord began biting into the heart, consuming it bit by bit. It was indeed a grotesque sight to behold, but it wasn't all that difficult to figure out the meaning behind his actions – well, his complexion improved greatly, and his body size ballooned up to a huge size, after all.

"Keuhahaha!!!"

Continuously growing larger and larger until he was as big as an Ogre, the Lord viciously laughed out and pounced on Sae-Jin and Kim Yu-Rin's direction.

For a something that big, he moved seriously fast. The Lord arrived in the blink of an eye and his fist flew toward their way. The moment they blocked that hit, it felt like every single bone in their bodies were twisting apart and exploding out from their bodies – the Lord's strike was that terrifyingly powerful. Even though the two of them shared the burden, the pressure was so immense that their eyeballs were about to pop out from the

sockets.

One seconds, two, then three... the incredible pressure gradually grew greater along with the Lord's ballooning muscles as the seconds ticked by.

If this continued, they would surely be squashed to death.

Sae-Jin glared at the Lord with his bloodshot eyes.

The darn b*stard was smiling.

That evil grin was so disgusting, Sae-Jin oh-so wanted to wipe it away really badly. He desperately rolled his brain that was on the brink of being squashed flat, until one possible method popped up in his head.

The Orc, and that 'most pure body' thingy.

That Skill allowed him to increase his physical strength by 1000%. If he added the Warrior of Reversal on top of that, then there should be nothing in this world that rivalled him for physical might.

Kim Yu-Rin was next to him but, since he had resigned himself to tell her the truth, it was now only the matter of time, instead...

His thoughts were quick, but his actions were even quicker. The thick fur covering his body disappeared, while his muscles quivered and quaked as his skin started to change.

Changing into the Orc Form, Sae-Jin opened his eyes wide, and at the same time as activating the Warrior of Reversal, he explosively forced his strength well past his limit.

SFX for the Orc's roar

The violently surging strength he could not control exploded out of his mouth. This marvelous power, this sense of overbearing boost bursting out from his insides – with that, he shoved the Lord's fist away with only one hand.

"Euh-euck..."

Freed from the Lord's pressure, Kim Yu-Rin crumbled to the ground. And she dazedly turned her gaze sideways.

An Orc, instead of Kim Sae-Jin, was standing there.

"......Hah. Seriously, I can't even..."

Utterly stunned, she broke out in a bitter chuckle.

The person she harboured warm emotions for the first time in her life turned out to be not an Orc at all. She didn't know whether to feel relieved, or be very p*ssed off at the man who had seemingly made fun of her until now.

But she couldn't think too deeply about this.

Her entire being felt fatigued. And an unavoidable sense of weakness washed over. She fainted in exhaustion where she sat.

"Oh, child. You have lost your humanity." (The Vampire Lord)

The Lord dazedly murmured as he stared at Sae-Jin and his brightly burning body.

"Why don't you take a moment to compose yourself..." (The Vampire Lord)

"Stop barking like a dog!!" (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin the Orc jumped up towards the midriff where the silver knife still remained stuck, and went to town there. The Vampire Lord spat out a mouthful of blood. Then, he muttered strange words.

"Ogribahack Sobet."

"What was that?" (Sae-Jin)

"Huhuh..." (The Vampire Lord)

His grin was rather ominous. Soon after, the Lord's body began to shrink back like a deflating balloon. He staggered around before falling on his back, then gazed at the darkened ceiling with sorrowful eyes. "I can not see anything anymore." (The Vampire Lord)

"Really." (Sae-Jin)

"Ever since losing my sight... I didn't expect my end to be like this... Oh child, come closer. Now that I've welcomed my fate, there is something I must tell you. Are you not curious, just what research I have been performing in here?" (The Vampire Lord)

The Lord gestured him to come closer. The Orc tilted his head and approached the dying Vampire.

And the Lord whispered several strange words to the Orc's ear.

Sae-Jin the Orc's brows narrowed. He just couldn't really understand what he was saying, centred around the words 'Monster', 'future', and 'past'.

Unfortunately, before explaining further, the Lord's breathing came to a gradual stop.

*

And so, the Vampire Lord was dead. And just like the decrepit king he was, his end was wretched and hollow.

Meanwhile, Kim Yu-Rin woke up largely unscathed after drinking a potion.

The two of them – Sae-Jin and Kim Yu-Rin – set out to locate the rest of the team. But they didn't talk. Trapped within this stubborn silence, they found the missing team members one by one.

Yi Hye-Rin and Joo Ji-Hyuk were this close from being frozen to death; Hazeline and Yu Baek-Song must've had a huge catfight as their faces were crimson red, their breathing rough and heavy; while both the conditions of Rhosrahdel and Kim Sun-Ho were quite critical. Having lost an arm each, if they were found even a minute later, they might have died.

In any case, everyone was alive, much to their relief.

Sae-Jin used the sorcery to teleport everyone back to the underground conference room.

While Yi Hye-Rin and Joo Ji-Hyuk warmed their bodies up, Sae-Jin begun his treatment on Rhosrahdel and Kim Sun-Ho – but, during that time, Yu Baek-Song and Hazeline broke out in yet another fight. And no, it wasn't some cute war of words either – it was more apt to describe it as fierce brawl, instead.

"Please, calm down, calm down I say!! Just what happened back there?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

"Will you two just stop already?! Stop!!" (Joo Ji-Hyuk)

Yi Hye-Rin grabbed Hazeline's arms, while Joo Ji-Hyuk held Yu Baek-Song back.

"But, she keeps teasing me and calls me a little kitty!!" (Yu Baek-Song)

"Hah, just when did I do that?! You started first by saying that I like Sae...." (Hazeline)

Yu Baek-Song's angry shout resounded to everywhere, but too bad, Hazeline's retort couldn't continue and had to come to a complete stop. Hazeline could only shrink away while checking out Sae-Jin's reactions.

It was then.

Kim Yu-Rin remained deep in thought, before she suddenly stood up from the couch.

"I'm going ahead first." (Kim Yu-Rin)

She spoke while staring at Sae-Jin pointedly.

"Ah, sure. T, take care." (Sae-Jin)

"You're not coming?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"....Eh?" (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin panicked at that moment. But, with a great timing, Jo

Hahn-Sung's phone call arrived at the same time.

"Please wait for a sec. Let me get this first... Hello? What's the matter?" (Sae-Jin)

- "Hello, Guild Master. Sir, we've got too many artifact orders piled up as we speak. So, I have set down dates for interviews, but..."

The contents were about the artifacts. The Monster lowered the pricing of the artifacts after taking into consideration the current climate of the world, and well, the number of orders coming from around the globe literally exploded. So, perhaps inevitably, they had to hold face to face interviews, in order to pick the right sort of people to own these artifacts.

"Oh, that. I'll take care of that later on, so don't worry. For now, give priority to the compiled list and sell accordingly, please." (Sae-Jin)

- "Yes, sir. I understand."

Sae-Jin quickly ended the call. But Kim Yu-Rin had long disappeared to elsewhere.

"...Huh."

"She went upstairs. Follow her. Dunno what's going on, but still." (Yi Hye-Rin)

Yi Hye-Rin answered for him. So, he hurriedly chased after Kim Yu-Rin.

< 45. The Entry (4) > Fin.

Chapter 157: Tension (1)

Wrapped up inside the thick darkness of the night, underneath the cold glare of the moon.

Kim Yu-Rin was sitting on one of The Monster Park's benches. Her eyes were closed, as if she was in a state of deep contemplation.

Sae-Jin breathed in deeply and walked towards her position.

"I'm disappointed." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Before he could get near her, though, she threw out this one line at him. He scratched the back of his neck while lowering his head.

"....I mean, seriously. Yes, it was somewhat odd, for sure – how can an Orc resemble a human so closely like that... Ah, now that I think about it, I do remember seeing several points that are really similar to Mister Sae-Jin's countenance, after all." (Kim Yu-Rin) Her reactions were completely out of Sae-Jin's expectations. Although not at the level of wanting to mow down everything, he at least thought she might get angry at him.

But no, what she displayed wasn't the rage at being deceived, nor sadness at finding out the Hero Orc wasn't real, but self-mockery that blamed herself instead. And that only made Sae-Jin feel even worse than before and far more apologetic as well.

Sae-Jin sat on the opposite end of the bench Kim Yu-Rin sat on. She gazed at the moon drawn on the night sky and continued with her words.

"No, from the beginning, an Orc with IQ known to be lower than that of a dolphin learning to speak was a nonsensical notion. I should've realised that something was amiss then... It's all because of that Goblin..." (Kim Yu-Rin) After hearing her sudden change in the topic, Sae-Jin's body shook imperceptibly.

'That Goblin'. Without a doubt, she must be talking about the

tale from a long time ago...

"Ah, right. Guild Master, did you know that Goblins can learn to speak, too?" (Kim Yu-Rin) "G, Goblins, you say?" (Sae-Jin)

"Yes. Well, Goblins are the smartest among all the Monsters, after all. So, among the smart Goblins, the one with the most smartest brain can learn how to speak Korean. But that was my mistake, thinking that a mutated Orc could definitely learn to talk, too. So, I'm definitely not a fool in that regard, right? Even other people with similar experiences would have been deceived." (Kim Yu-Rin) Sae-Jin's complexion froze up along with her words. His gestures became eye-catchingly strange, and his breathing became quite rough as well.

"Why are you reacting like that? It's the truth. I've experienced it firsthand." (Kim Yu-Rin) "......"

Sae-Jin didn't reply. He was already feeling so, so apologetic right now, and well, he realised that he just couldn't speak another lie to her again.

But, she ended up misinterpreting his current reaction and showed her frustration with a deep frown.

"You don't believe me... Hah, fine. Forget about it. It'll be more strange to believe me anyway." (Kim Yu-Rin) "No, I do believe you." (Sae-Jin)

He resolutely replied to her and stared at Kim Yu-Rin with his eyes wide open. Seeing his sudden 'enthusiasm', Kim Yu-Rin's face reddened ever so slightly.

"Oh, uh, thank you for believing me..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"The thing is, that Goblin, that was also me." (Sae-Jin)

".....Eh?"

This time, it was Kim Yu-Rin who ceased all her movements – her mouth half-open, and her eyes opened up extra round.

Thinking that she might not believe him, Sae-Jin hammered the final nail in this particular coffin.

"Your gift, I received it well. It's an expensive ring, too." (Sae-Jin) "Uh....."

She fell into a pool of thought for a brief moment; a ring as a gift. A ring given away as a gift was a fact that only she and the Goblin knew. No one else.

"Mm. So that's how it was." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Plop.

She dazedly muttered out something, and then collapsed.

The physical strain of fighting against the Vampire Lord, as well as two mental shocks, caused her to faint.

"What the?! Miss Yu-Rin? Why?!" (Sae-Jin)

Stunned silly by this new development, Sae-Jin quickly used healing magic on her. But when she still didn't regain her consciousness, he quickly carried her off to the nearest hospital.

After admitting Kim Yu-Rin to the hospital, Sae-Jin went around sorting out the strained relationships of the Guild members that soured for one reason or the other. And finally, came back home.

The time was 5 o'clock in the afternoon.

Since Yu Sae-Jung was busy with the matters related to the Wizard Tower and frequently had to be away, the house was left totally empty for the first time in a long while.

"Uh-whew..."

He dug into the couch while spitting out a long sigh thick with all the accumulated fatigue. Somehow, he felt empty and hollow. The mission was over, and the sense of extreme enervation gripped his entire body. Thinking that he must have been feeling lonely, SaeJin turned on the TV. With a good timing, Yu Sae-Jung's face filled up the screen.

- When are you planning for the IPO of the Dawn & TM's Wizard Tower?
- Listing stocks for the Tower? Is there a need for me to do that? After all, our Wizard Tower can fully sustain itself without resorting to such methods, you see.

It was an interview on a news programme. Yu Sae-Jung came across as very confident in her speech.

Seeing her on the screen, he ended up wanting to see her for real. So, he called her on the phone. Wuoong, wuoong~ After the ringtone went on for three, four times, the call got through.

"Hey, Sae-Jung. Where are you now?" (Sae-Jin)

- "Mm~uong. Me, I'm eating out with people who will work for the Wizard Tower, yup."

Her voice was a bit slurred. Did she drink alcohol? Sae-Jin's brows narrowed all of a sudden.

"Where?" (Sae-Jin)

- "Ah, here? A sushi restaurant."

As she spoke on the phone, another voice belonging to a man repeatedly saying "Who are you speaking to?" interfered in the background. Unconsciously, Sae-Jin cracked his neck. The sounds of Wou-de-deuk. Wou-de-deuk rang out rather clearly.

- "Which sushi restaurant?" (Sae-Jin)
- "Ah-heung~? Oh, why did you call me, Oppa?"
- "...I was wondering where you went off to. Hey, so where are you right now?"
 - "Ah, here? Uh... not so sure?"

[&]quot;You wanna get killed?!"

- "Ah~eeeng. Forgive me. It's a meeting for the Tower, so if Oppa shows up, I'm gonna get shoved aside, you know~."

Of course, he could understand that much. But right now, that clueless dude next to her asking "Who is that? Who's calling?" was seriously getting on his nerves.

"Okay, fine. Then switch the phone to the speaker. I want to say something." (Sae-Jin) – ".....Uh? Uh... Oh... Is there really a need for that now~? I'll speak on your behalf~!"

"I promise, it'll be real quick. I'm not coming home for a whole week if you don't." (Sae-Jin) – "Eii... okay, okay. Fine.It's done, you're on speaker."

Sae-Jin manipulated his vocal cord and changed his voice a little bit. And then, towards all those people relaxedly dining out and building a strong friendship, he threw out the proverbial bombshell.

"Euh-eum. Hello, everyone, this is the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong speaking. Currently, I'm with Mister Kim Sae-Jin. I'm making this call after having a good chat with him. You see, I'm planning to publish the grimoires number 27 and 28 very soon. And so, I seek two capable persons who will examine and verify the contents of the books. Is there anyone among you who is interested in the role?" (Sae-Jin the Wizard) He spoke up to here and waited for three seconds.

By examining the grimoires, one could have his or her name associated with the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong's grimoire for free. That alone would increase their fame far greatly than ever thought possible. And sure enough, the animalistic heavy breathing of every Wizard wishing to seize this enormous opportunity could be heard through the phone.

Sae-Jin did his very best to hold back his laughter and spoke in a serious tone.

"If no one is interested, then it can't be helped, I guess." (Sae-Jin) Instantly, Wizards reacted.

At first, in order to prove each one of them possessed the right qualifications over the person next to him or her, they began 'quietly' debating their academic abilities.

- "Seeing that the Wizard-nim of Bangbae-Dong has been continuously publishing attack magic spells lately, I, who has steadfastly walked the road of attack magic until now should be the one to examine the new grimoires."
- "No, that's not right. Attacking spells needs to be combined with other types of spells. From that point of view, I should take on the responsibility, as I've arduously walked on the path of application and utilisation of various magics..."
- "Both of you are wrong. From the onset, something this important should be seen by someone with a deep academic background, instead."
- "Huh, what do you mean by a deep academic background? Are you using that inconsequential reasoning for such an important matter?" (TL: Oh boy. These four paragraphs were an absolute mess to TL. I did what I could, but not sure how close I got to what the author was trying to say.) However, the tone of the voice got heated as rebuttal after rebuttal were thrown around. And soon enough, not only angry shouts but even the sounds of plates, tables, and other furniture being destroyed could be heard from the phone.

"Huhuh. They're fighting so nicely." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin was enjoying the sound of the chaos, but then, the noise got abruptly cut off. It seemed that Yu Sae-Jung had left the restaurant in a hurry.

- "Those people lost their dang marbles!! Just now, they were even getting ready to use magic, you know!"

"Hehehe. In that case, why don't you bring along the winner over here?" (Sae-Jin) – "....You're a rotten person, you know that? Seriously now."

Although her dinner out was totally ruined, she sounded rather pleased for some reason.

- "By the way, publishing two grimoires at the same time, is that true? If you're lying, I'm going to get mad!"

And that was why. Sae-Jin smirked slightly.

"Of course, I will. Okay, where are you? I'll pick you up." (Sae-Jin) – "Oh yeah~. I'm at the Tebudong Sashimi~. Hurry up, Oppa~."

"On the way." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin ended the call and put on the coat. But, as he was about to leave, he overheard the news still left playing on the TV screen.

– A news just in. It has been now confirmed that a super-massive Fissure has opened up in the region of Western Europe. This Fissure is the biggest ever recorded in the history to appear in Europe...

".....What's going on?" (Sae-Jin)

This was different from the promise with her. So, Sae-Jin tried to contact Bathory through the communication crystal hidden in his pocket, but she didn't reply. Was she going back on her promise?

Just as the back of his head began developing a strong case of migraine, Bathory's voice got transmitted to him, which was fortunate.

'Come see me tomorrow. Busy today.'

*

Immediately on the following day, Sae-Jin went to see Bathory.

"I'm sure you've found out already whether we succeeded or

not." (Sae-Jin) "Yep. I know already. El Las and their loyal dogs were throwing a huge tantrum not too long ago." (Bathory) Bathory was pretending to be relaxed, but the emotions of sadness couldn't be disguised in her voice. Plus, her eyes staring at Sae-Jin weren't even looking at him, either – memories of distant past were sorrowfully overflowing from within those eyes that rippled like the surface of a lake.

"Who's el Las now?" (Sae-Jin)

When Sae-Jin asked her, Bathory tilted her head in confusion. It looked as if she had misplaced a couple of screws in her head.

"Oh, el Las? They are a clan. The Bathory, the Nosferatu, the el Las – only these three remain now." (Bathory) She forced out a smile and continued on.

"And, your prediction was right. What the Lord wanted wasn't going back in time, just a simple travel through to another dimension. Apparently, after deciphering the text from the ancient tome, jumping both the time flow and dimensions at the same time is impossible." (Bathory) "Is that so?" (Sae-Jin)

"Because of that, both the el Las and the Lord's retainers are in a state of rage right now. I think the Lord was thinking of running away alone." (Bathory) "....."

"On top of that, the treasure that controlled the Vampire's instincts for blood has been lost a long time ago after the Lord lost his sight. How... pathetic." (Bathory) Bathory stopped talking here. Sae-Jin too, didn't say anything.

However, when he came to see her, he had lots of things to say. The incident involving the Fissure in Western Europe; the future for the Vampires that have lost the central figure of the Lord; Bathory's aim; and even, persuading her to assimilate back into the society.

Sae-Jin couldn't utter any of these out.

The reason? Tear drops forming on the corners of Bathory's eyes. Sure, Sae-Jin couldn't get her fickle nature that took her from asking him to kill the Lord, and to mourn his passing, but whatever, the sorrow she displayed right now was, without a doubt, genuine.

"What a coward. Good thing he died." (Bathory)

Bathory spoke thus, her voice tinged in deep sadness.

However, he couldn't return empty-handed after going through the big showdown of the day before.

So, Sae-Jin cautiously asked her about the giant Fissure of Western Europe first.

"We have nothing to do with that one." (Bathory)

"...What? Really?" (Sae-Jin)

"Yeah. We didn't touch other Fissures except the one here in Korea." (Bathory) "Does that mean there's another force at work here?" (Sae-Jin)

"Nope. That's just nature playing its part. From the moment the first Fissure opened up, the future path for this little planet called Earth became full of thorns, so to speak." (Bathory) "What do you mean by that?" (Sae-Jin)

"What I mean is that, this planet Earth will meet the same fate as my old homeworld, that's what. The Lord was trying to escape before that happened, too. But I don't know all the details. I also just heard about it not too long ago, you know." (Bathory) "From who?" (Sae-Jin)

"From my subordinates. They are busy trying to decipher the results of the research the Lord has performed, right now. I'm getting updated in real time as we speak." (Bathory) Bathory then abruptly stood from her seat.

"Okay, you should go now. As promised, we won't interfere with

you lot or try to extend the Fissure forcefully or stuff like that. With that much, you should have about a year's worth of breathing room." (Bathory) "....Just one year?" (Sae-Jin)

"Yup. So, you should decide and prepare whether you'll act like us and escape to another world, or stay and fight till the bitter end." (Bathory) "What will you do?" (Sae-Jin)

Bathory narrowed her brows as if she was getting frustrated with a little kid.

"....Our object has always been the same – to return to our old home world, see. So, get the eff out, now." (Bathory) She suddenly grabbed Sae-Jin's collars real tightly. And then, an unpleasant sensation of the entire world twisting apart washed over, causing him to squeeze his eyes shut. When he belatedly opened his eyes again, Bathory was nowhere to be seen, and instead, the sight of Seoul's Gangnam district filled up his vision.

"Why Gangnam, of all places?!" (Sae-Jin)

As he looked around dumbfoundedly, whisperings of the passersby tickled his ears.

"What the? Isn't he that Kim Sae-Jin guy?"

"You might be right. Hey man, go and take a closer look."

It hadn't even been a minute yet, but the waves of crowd were gradually building up.

Sae-Jin let out a 'groan' of exclamation, thinking that celebrities could indeed upset the heavens if needed, and quickly moved his feet. Too bad, his actions only ended up confirming the crowd's suspicions.

"It is Kim Sae-Jin!!"

"Oppa, please gimme your autograph!!"

"Opppaaaaaa-ack~!!!"

Getting scared by that loud cry, Sae-Jin ran away like his rear

was on fire.

< 46. Tension (1) > Fin.

Chapter 158: Tension (2)

All the core posts for the Dawn & TM's Wizard Tower had now been mostly filled up – the Vice Tower Lord and seven Chief Wizards that were similar to executive directors in a regular corporation, plus the employee-level high-class, mid-class, and low-class positions, as well.

The name of the Vice Lord caused a massive stir, however. The Wizard appointed to this prestigious position was none other than the High Elf 'Shahon', former Vice Lord of the New York-based world no. 2 Wizard Tower, 'Trinity'.

After the announcement for her appointment was made, Shahon expressed her sincere gratitude towards the Dawn & TM's Tower through various interviews she did with the mass media. Hell, she even did that in fluent Korean. No one had any idea when she learned the language, either.

Not only that, the identities of the people filling up the Chief Wizard positions were quite something to behold as well – former Vice Lord for the Seoul Tower, former Lord of Busan Tower, etc. etc... They consisted of famous local and international Wizards.

However, the most important position remained vacant while other spots were steadily being filled up. Not one person expressed their curiosity regarding that, though. After all, everyone understood that this position could only go to the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong and no one else.

Even someone like Hazeline, who had once been a part of the Wizarding world but left it due to a certain unsavoury incident, thought the same as well – but, only until the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong himself, Kim Sae-Jin, personally called for her.

".....Excuse me?" (Hazeline)

Currently, inside Sae-Jin's office. Hazeline asked him in a daze

while sitting opposite him. Within her extra-round eyes, questions and disbelief floated about.

"So, what do you think? I personally think you're the perfect fit." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin smiled as he spoke.

The reason why he summoned her here was simple. It was to appoint her the new Tower Lord.

The media might throw a hissy fit and say what on earth he was thinking, but this wasn't a completely left-field hiring at all – because, although she was currently the well-known Alchemist Miss Hazeline, her actual origin lied with magic. She simply stepped away on her own volition after failing to control her emotions properly.

But Sae-Jin believed she still possessed a massive attachment to the world of magic, even now.

If not, then there wouldn't be a reason for her to look up the Wizards' online chat rooms and communities periodically, no reason to jump around in joy like a little kid after successfully learning a new spell, and of course, no point in her coming up with the fake identity of "Shenarine" and secretly acting as a Wizard, either.

" "

Hazeline maintained her silence – probably because of Kim Yu-Rin. Unless Hazeline resolved her long-standing conflict and the guilt associated with it, she would never be able to find the necessary courage to return to the world of magic, perhaps for the rest of her life.

"The thing is..." (Hazeline)

Hazeline fixed her stares to the floor and opened her mouth while fidgeting uncomfortably. Her voice was so weak and quiet.

"Mister Sae-Jin, thank you for your consideration. But, my abilities aren't..." (Hazeline)

"I'm sure they are better than Miss Shahon's. You perfectly studied all of the Bangbae-Dong Wizard's grimoires, after all." (Sae-Jin)

Hazeline had been virtually camping out in the Guild's membersonly library of late – obviously, in order to thoroughly study the grimoires of Bangbae-Dong Wizard.

Currently, she had flawlessly memorised the books number 1 to 26, and had reached the stage where she could potentially invent her own unique attack spell as well.

So, her qualifications were more than good enough.

But, she still lacked confidence. No, it was more like, she lacked courage.

"That's only because of the Mana Tattoos, you know. What I lack in technique, I cover it with increased Mana reserve, that's all. And also, I..." (Hazeline)

It seemed that she had more things to say, but other than her lips moving a bit, no words came out of them.

Sae-Jin didn't know the exact words she wanted to say, but he could still roughly estimate what she wanted to say, regardless.

"Miss Kim Yu-Rin also gave her consent." (Sae-Jin)

"....Eh?"

Those words seemed unrealistic, rather than 'shocking', to her. Because, there was no way Kim Yu-Rin would forgive her.

While studying her face frozen in stunned silence, Sae-Jin recalled the events from the day before.

*

"If you're asking me for my professional opinion, then I'm

against it. No. Totally against it! Tooootally, completely, against it." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Her answer was very resolute for a patient still lying on a hospital bed. And there was even a hint of hostility in Kim Yu-Rin's expressions.

"But, why?" (Sae-Jin)

"She's definitely not normal in her head. I mean, where in the world can you find a crazy woman like her who poisons a person's potion? There's no guarantee that she won't do that ever again." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"But you also don't have the guarantee that she will do it again, either." (Sae-Jin)

"......In any case, I'm still totally against it. It's too risky." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin pouted heavily.

At the ends of her hospital bed, stuffed dolls of the Orc and Athany stood side by side. Sae-Jin reached out and took the Orc doll. A sense of unease entered Kim Yu-Rin's eyes, hoping that he wouldn't take the doll away.

"Just what happened between you two?" (Sae-Jin)

He gently patted the top of the Orc doll and placed it on top of the bureau next to her bed.

".....It's complicated. By a lot." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin reached out and rescued the doll from the cold, hard wooden surface. And then, hid it securely under the covers.

"Well, it's not my place to pry into your past... However, Miss Hazeline is just about perfect for the position of the Tower Lord. At a bare minimum, I'd like a Wizard who is close to me filling up that position." (Sae-Jin)

"Surely, there must be lots of other, more suitable Wizards you

can find, right? No, besides that, why are you asking me about this? I'm not related to this matter at all. If the Guild Master wishes for it, then you can just hire that crazy bitc... that person, am I wrong?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

She remained resolute. As befitting a 30-year old boyfriend-less lifelong loner, she was like an iron wall.

"That's because, without your consent, I'm pretty certain that Miss Hazeline wouldn't want to do it, either." (Sae-Jin)

".....No way that's true." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Yes, way."

Kim Yu-Rin looked like she didn't believe him. She even went as far as to change the topic of the conversation when Sae-Jin tried to continue his persuasion.

"Let's talk about that later. More importantly, there's something I'm curious about, Guild Master." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"....Okay, what is it?" (Sae-Jin)

"I saw at the end there. What did the Lord say to you?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

The whispered words of the dying Vampire Lord – Sae-Jin couldn't understand them back then, and he still couldn't understand even now. But he remembered them all too clearly.

"It was like he was making a prophecy of some kind, but I have no idea what he was trying to say. On top of that, some of the words must have been in the Vampire language, because I couldn't even hear those parts at all."

When the Leviathan Form evolved he became able to decipher a handful of the native Vampire language, but truly, they were just a meagre handful. And all of them happened to be swearing, too.

But, Kim Yu-Rin didn't lose her interest in this matter.

"What did he ended up saying?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

".....Hmm. 'I stole a peek through a certain treasure of the Nosferatus. The worst monster in the history will become the hero'. It was something like that." (Sae-Jin)

"Hmm...."

As if she was thinking deeply, Kim Yu-Rin's forehead creased up.

"Hmm.... Mmm...." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Fuhut."

Kim Sae-Jin burst out laughing after quietly gazing at her trying to look serious and stuff. And then, pulled out the present he brought along. It was a stuffed doll that depicted a cute Goblin.

The common saying of 'how cute can a Goblin be' couldn't be applied to this doll. A roundish, chubby head and short limbs – this cuteness was on the level that even Sae-Jin felt boastful about. And the evidence of its cuteness was Kim Yu-Rin's face that was slowly melting into a puddle.

But she quickly hardened her face and spoke up.

"A Goblin, is it.... Thank you for that time. I was able to survive, thanks to you." (Kim Yu-Rin)

She then extended her hand out matter-of-factly. Her face was full of covetousness, telling him to hand over the doll already. Too bad, Sae-Jin had no plans to do that, at least not so soon.

"Hahaha... thank you for the kind words. But, are you really refusing so quickly to help me on the matter I'm asking you about?" (Sae-Jin)

Kim Yu-Rin's smooth eyebrows twitched after she heard his words. Sae-Jin was aiming for this moment.

"...Why don't you guys meet up and talk first? Miss Hazeline is also regretting her actions as well. Plus, you receive this doll as a bonus on top." (Sae-Jin)

He playfully shook the doll's b**t and seduced her.

While looking at Hazeline's stunned face, Sae-Jin clapped his hands loudly. Then, the door to his office was yanked open, and the heavy footsteps reverberated against the walls.

Hazeline froze up like the 'mangbuseok'. She didn't dare to turn her head around to look, only her eyeballs desperately shifted around. (TL: the legend of 'mangbuseok' comes from the Korean history/folklore. Basically, a government official is sent to Japan back in 5th century AD for some sort of a rescue mission, his wife cries her eyes out by the shore, and allegedly turns into a stone statue, or something like that. Can't find a link in English that describes the lore, so well, take my word for it. Not sure why the author chose to use this reference, though.)

The unknown person arrived right behind Hazeline and threw out this one line.

"Hey, you. Look at me." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Hazeline's shoulders jumped up. Looking as if she might fall off her chair at any moment, she stiffly turned around to look. And as expected, Kim Yu-Rin was standing there. The only difference was, she didn't carry the same-old expression of anger.

"....Let's talk for a bit." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Her voice sounded rather bitter for some reason.

"Uh, uh... S, sure thing." (Hazeline)

Hazeline dazedly replied. Kim Yu-Rin then turned to leave, before speaking up once more.

"Just the two of us. Will that be fine, Guild Master?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Of course." (Sae-Jin)

Kim Yu-Rin left the office first, and with a totally terrified face, Hazeline followed right after. Sae-Jin had no idea what the two of them talked about.

But, he could guess that the matter between them was heading towards the right direction, after he heard the noises of Hazeline's loud sobbing as well as the much softer sounds of Kim Yu-Rin lightly patting the crying Elf's back.

*

August, a month of scorching heatwaves assaulting the public.

This should have been the season when all the vacationing spots would be jam packed with holiday makers, but the current status of the world wasn't nice enough for something so relaxed like that.

Boss Monsters were popping up everywhere all the time; a huge Fissure opened up in Western Europe; and to top them off, predictions of the so-called experts that said, what the world was experiencing was not a one-off thing at all.

And because of all this unprecedented chaos, even the heatwave ended up feeling quite bone-chilling to everyone alive.

But, The Monster's status was shooting up like crazy, totally opposite to the direction of ruination the world was busy walking towards.

Showing a gradual rise from the initial Boss Monster incidents, then with the huge Fissure in Europe opening up, boom!! The Monster's sister company, TM's stock prices surged up through the roof, until shooting past the atmosphere, entering the stratosphere and beyond.

With this, Sae-Jin came to a realisation how the USA was able to become the most dominant, wealthiest nation on earth through the First World War.

The number of Griffins living in the nesting area managed by The Monster now totalled almost 600. Many countries in Europe begged to rent out this amazing method of transportation that allowed one to travel from the city of Sinuiju to Busan in less than three minutes, while requiring no prior preparation whatsoever. The amount they proposed for one Griffin was ten million Euros, and the duration being only a month. (TL: Sinuiju is a city in North Korea that borders Chinese city, Dandong. Basically, it's on the other side of the Korean peninsula from the city of Busan.)

Plus, the demand for The Monster's Mercenaries had increased by a great deal as well. There were 2300 Mercenaries working for The Monster, and only around 50 of them were currently not out on a mission – because, they were injured at the moment.

Also, The Monster established a 'control tower' of sorts, which would play the central role in making the important decisions in this fast-changing world. Well, it wasn't exactly 'establishing', but more like moving all the personnel that acted as the brains of the organisation into one spot.

And that spot just so happened to be the underground conference room hidden below The Monster Guild's HQ building, where the weekly meetings between the Guild members took place.

"Right now, around 100 Knights each from the countries England, Germany, and France are requesting for the licence to ride Griffins. And the orders for the various artifacts and the Orc's weapons are backed up to the point where we are running out of the numbered waiting tickets." (Jo Hahn-Sung)

Jo Hahn-Sung spoke while browsing through the documents.

Sae-Jin could only spit out long sighs, though.

The time he needed for making an artifact or a weapon depended solely on the grade of the finished item. Although the Proficiency Levels for several Skills, such as dexterity, had increased by a lot, he still required a minimum of two hours to craft a single item that could be rated 'the best' or the so-called 'Named Goods'.

And to compound the difficulty, he even seemed to have developed the mentality of a true artisan – he didn't want to sell

those artifacts he wasn't satisfied with, so out of ten he made, Sae-Jin ended up throwing away three just because he was unhappy with them.

He tried not to do this, but it was now ingrained in his instincts. He'd go crazy and destroy the offending articles, before regaining his senses and regret his actions a bit later. This repeated over and over again.

"....Many things have been delayed like this, sir." (Jo Hahn-Sung)

Jo Hahn-Sung studied Sae-Jin's mood before saying some words that indirectly conveyed his message. He was urging Sae-Jin for answers.

"Do one of those interviews or whatever and remove some of them off the list, please. The best I can do is three items a day." (Sae-Jin)

"But if that happens, we might end up starting a bloody competition between the aforementioned European nations. The current crisis of the planet can only be overcome if all the earthlings band togethe..." (Jo Hahn-Sung)

"What was that? Did you just say something?" (Sae-Jin)

".....No, sir." (Jo Hahn-Sung)

"....I'll do what I can, so for now, let me off the hook with this much." (Sae-Jin)

"Yes, sir."

And with that, the matters related to weapons and artifacts came to an end. Too bad for him, that wasn't the only topic to discuss, however.

"Next. France's president, as well as prime ministers of Spain and England requested for a face-to-face meeting with you, sir. They wish to discuss the topics regarding the Mercenaries as well as various others. Each of them are asking you to meet them first, and to the Korean government..." (Jo Hahn-Sung)

"Wow. Our Guild Master is so busy~. It's really, really cool, you know~."

Yi Hye-Rin let off a soft exclamation of admiration as she continued to interestedly observe the proceedings from the side. However... Kim Yu-Rin smacked the back of her head, then.

"Ouch!! That hurts, you know!!" (Yi Hye-Rin)

"If you're aware of how busy he is, then stop distracting him." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"H, hmm..." (Hazeline)

Meanwhile, Hazeline cautiously slid in between the bickering duo while carrying a slightly weird expression – or, more correctly, with an envious face.

"...Y, Yu-Rin-ah, are you enjoying your lunch?" (Hazeline)

"....Yeah, it's nice." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Really? I, I'm feeling full right now, so... would you like my portion of meat as well?" (Hazeline)

Hazeline asked with a red face while busy fidgeting around with her fingers. Kim Yu-Rin's cheeks also reddened slightly, and with an unsure face, she too hesitated. But then, like a swift and crafty little cat, Yu Baek-Song sitting next to them quickly butted in.

"In that case, gimme." (Yu Baek-Song)

"A, aht!! Hey, put it down, you idiot!" (Hazeline)

"You said you're full, though." (Yu Baek-Song)

Nyam, nyam.

Before anything could be done, Yu Baek-Song swallowed the steak in one gulp. Rage filled Hazeline's reddened face this time as she stood up and pointed her angry finger at Yu Baek-Song.

"What the heck!! This crazy cat burglar...!!" (Hazeline)

"It's fine." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"....Oh, really?" (Hazeline)

...But with a single hand gesture from Kim Yu-Rin, Hazeline promptly sat back down on her seat.

And Yi Hye-Rin on the side interestedly studied this clear display of power dynamics between these two people.

< 46. Tension (2) > Fin.

Chapter 159: Tension (3)

"Well then, I'll be on my way, Guild Master." (Jo Hahn-Sung) The insufferable meeting with Jo Hahn-Sung that lasted for over two hours finally came to an end.

"Feels like I might really die at this rate..." (Sae-Jin)

After Jo Hahn-Sung had left the conference room, Sae-Jin lied down on the couch immediately.

His vision was blurring, and his head ached. When he looked around the conference room, he found that the Guild members hadn't left for home just yet. Some of them even brought along their own duvets and blankets, suggesting that maybe they were planning to camp out here, of all places.

- After researchers uncovered the crucial fact that the martial arts from the Jin Mudo School is particularly effective when combating Monster threats, the school has experienced an unprecedented level of boom recently. The dojo master, Miss Yi Yu-Jin is...

At the same time, the news on the television was delivering a story regarding the Jin Mudo. When Sae-Jin turned his attention towards the TV, he saw Yi Yu-Jin and her considerably improved complexion, plus her toothy smile, dominating the screen.

[Jin Mudo School master/The Monster Guild member]

– We have over 2000 dojos operating across the globe at the moment, with nearly ten thousand disciples receiving instructions. (Yi Yu-Jin) – It sure is a wonderful trend without a doubt. By the way, what do you, as the leader of this martial arts school, think is the true advantage of this form of martial arts? (Interviewer) – To me, the advantage is that, during the fight against Monsters in a stand-off situation, you're not hindered by your weapons, instead relying solely on the most natural movements your body can

make. Plus, let's take a look at gauntlets; they are much easier to manufacture compared to other armaments, so, although they might be rated as similar in overall quality, you can find more gauntlets in circulation and crucially, they are cheaper to buy as well. And so, I believe that these and other points have combined to give the spotlight to our school of martial arts when it comes to the matter of Monster subjugation. (TL: gauntlets are easier to make? Seriously? Mister Author, tell that to the medieval blacksmiths, see how they react...) "...They've grown by that much already?" (Sae-Jin)

Kim Sae-Jin got thoroughly impressed by the contents of the interview. Of course, The Monster did shower the school with an unrestrained level of support, but still, to grow by that much during the short period of two years was...

"Did you know that they've gotten really famous lately? The main body of texts and all the movement diagrams are left completely intact, so it's really easy to train in the art, and plus, its effectiveness is quite high, apparently. It's one of those ridiculous low risk, high return scenario, you see? I mean, our Knights Order received four Jin Mudo disciples during this year's new recruitment process, out of ten people selected this year!" (Yi Hye-Rin) Yi Hye-Rin replied to him while watching the TV.

"Oh, really?" (Sae-Jin)

"By the way, that dojo master girl is also one of the Guild members, right?" (Kim Yu-Rin) Kim Yu-Rin asked while resting her chin on her hands. Joo Ji-Hyuk volunteered an answer this time.

"Yes, that's correct. I've met her a few times, and she seems to be a nice person." (Joo Ji-Hyuk) "....And just why would you meet her in the first place?" (Yi Hye-Rin) Suddenly, Yi Hye-Rin glared at Joo Ji-Hyuk with eyes narrowed to a slit like a flatfish. And as the flustered Joo Ji-Hyuk began to stammer out an excuse, the interview got abruptly cut off without a warning. Then, the

anchor began reading a new information, saying it was the breaking news.

– Near the province of Gangwon, a Mah-in has made an appearance. This Mah-in is understood to be an Ogre in origin...

A footage of a giant male 'man' rampaging around with bloodshot eyes was transmitted next. Everyone in the conference room held their breaths and watched the TV.

Those referred to as 'Mah-ins' hadn't appeared publicly in the past ten years or so. If one did, then it was terminated almost immediately. The modern world viewed Mah-ins as even worse enemies of mankind than Vampires, after all.

Well, Vampires had the excuse of their own survival when attacking humans, but Mah-ins didn't, as they simply enjoyed causing destruction and committing murder.

However, such a Mah-in had shown up out of the blue. Publicly, too.

"....Should we go and help?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin asked as she lowered her duvet. But Sae-Jin shook his head.

"No need. It's walking around that exposed, so most likely, it's been subjugated already." (Sae-Jin) – It has been confirmed that this Mah-in was subjugated by the Griffin Rider, Kim In-Soo, a short while ago.

With a great timing, the anchor spoke up. As Sae-Jin shrugged his shoulders, Kim Yu-Rin pulled the duvet closer.

"Oh, right. That Kim In-Soo, doesn't he have a bit of history with you, Guild Master?" (Yi Hye-Rin) Yi Hye-Rin suddenly asked Sae-Jin as if the thought suddenly popped up in her head now.

"We did have a little run-in back then, sure. But, how did you find that out?" (Sae-Jin) "Sae-Jung told me. She said that you and

Kim In-Soo fought over her and stuff~?" (Yi Hye-Rin) "Fut."

Fighting over her...

Sae-Jin simply smiled.

Although his first encounter with Kim In-Soo wasn't positive, Sae-Jin didn't harbour any ill feelings towards the guy at all.

Actually, Sae-Jin ran into Kim In-Soo again about three months ago. He remembered that, as the Lycanthrope, he broke Kim In-Soo's weapon back then, so he ended up gifting an Orc's weapon to the poor guy.

Kim In-Soo expressed how grateful he was, with teardrops forming on his eyes and everything, while repenting on how much of a schmuck he was in the past.

"What? Fighting over her? Isn't it more like Sae-Jung doing everything she can in order to keep Mister Sae-Jin by her side, instead? I mean, she should be relieved that no one has snatched him away yet..." (Hazeline) "She was probably only joking, though." (Yi Hye-Rin)

"Even if it was a joke, Sae-Jung's getting a little too conceited lately." (Hazeline) Hazeline pouted as if she was unhappy about something. Too bad, Kim Yu-Rin's ultra-sharp eyes quickly stabbed into her back.

"....No, wait – y, you know, looking at her objectively, she is really like that nowadays." (Hazeline) "Well, that is true." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Looking at Kim Yu-Rin suddenly agreeing with Hazeline, Sae-Jin simply carried on smiling.

"But still, you should refrain from saying those things again." (Kim Yu-Rin) "I understand..." (Hazeline)

Hazeline cutely replied back and leaned her head on Kim Yu-Rin's shoulder. But, as if that was annoying, Kim Yu-Rin moved

slightly to the side to avoid it.

Sae-Jin chuckled while looking at the two.

*

A week after that, the appointment of the Tower Lord was announced to the public.

As expected, big reverberation and controversy got kicked up at the same time. It was all par for the course, really – since, although Hazeline was an A class Wizard approved by the government, the fact remained that she didn't work as one for over eight years.

It didn't take long before her status as The Monster Guild's member got revealed, though. That helped turn around the public's sentiment towards her favour. Of course, that was only the public's...

"Isn't there more water?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"...Please endure for a bit longer." (Sae-Jin)

Currently, the top floor of the Dawn and TM's Wizard Tower.

Sae-Jin was standing before Hazeline's office. But he wasn't alone. And the person accompanying him was Kim Yu-Rin.

It was her very first time visiting Hazeline's workplace which was stressing her out a lot, causing her to ask constantly for a glass of water for quite some time now.

"I, I'm going to the bathroom for a moment, so please go ahead and wait for me inside." (Kim Yu-Rin) "Eh? No, hey, wait a sec..." (Sae-Jin)

Before Sae-Jin could say anything, she ran away like a fired arrow. He could only look on dumbfoundedly at her disappearing back, before knocking on the door to Hazeline's office.

"Who is it..."

The initial reply was rather energyless and also sounded annoyed

as well.

"It's Kim Sae-Jin. Miss Yu-Rin is accompanying me as well."

Almost immediately, there was a change in her reaction.

With a hurried shout of "Just wait for a moment!!", the sounds of something tumbling around could be heard beyond the door, and he even sensed faint traces of magic being used as well. It seemed that she was busy tidying up the messy interior with magic.

Sae-Jin relaxedly waited for her to finish.

And after five minutes passed by, an officious voice leaked out from beyond the door.

"Please, enter."

She sounded needlessly dignified. Sae-Jin smiled thinly and opened the door.

Hazeline was sitting with her legs crossed and her back leaning against the back of the chair. Was that how a Tower Lord should sit? Sae-Jin swallowed back down his rising laughter, and sat down on a chair located in front of Hazeline's desk. Meanwhile, she looked beyond Sae-Jin, searching for Kim Yu-Rin's shadow.

"She went off to a restroom. But, besides all that, how is the work treating you after ten days on the job?" (Sae-Jin) "Yes? Ah...... It's fine, more or less." (Hazeline)

Her complexion wasn't so good, though. When Sae-Jin narrowed his brows questioningly, she quickly added a couple extra words as well.

"I can't seem to adjust properly, is all." (Hazeline)

"What do you mean, you can't adjust?" (Sae-Jin)

"To the Wizarding world, I mean. I'm returning to it after so long, so... It's hard accepting their way of doing things." (Hazeline) "Hmm..."

Actually, he had some idea of what was going on, after hearing about it before coming here. Thanks to her unexpected and somewhat explosive appointment, factionalism had developed within the Tower already.

However, the situation was just too one-sided to call it 'factionalism'. On one side, a faction formed around the High Elf Shahon, and on the opposite side, it was Hazeline all by herself. The rest were remaining neutral.

"And besides that, anything else bothering you?" (Sae-Jin)

"I'm okay with the rest." (Hazeline)

Hazeline didn't tell him. She was trying not to worry him.

But, if this situation persisted, it was only a matter of time before Hazeline got swallowed up. If that happened, it would get too troubling for Sae-Jin.

Thankfully, though, she still had one very important ally she could count on. And this one single ally was far more reliable than any other rotten a*swipes combined together.

"Well, in any case, I believe that Miss Hazeline will adopt to the situation accordingly." (Sae-Jin) "Of course. You don't have to worry." (Hazeline)

For a briefest moment, a hint of anguish brushed past her expressions, but that was all.

"Oh, that's right." (Sae-Jin)

He figured that he should stop beating around the bush, and nonchalantly pulled out two books.

"Here. I almost forgot about them." (Sae-Jin)

They were the unpublished Bangbae-Dong grimoires number 27 and 28.

As soon as she confirmed them via the covers, panic spread on Hazeline's face.

"But, but why are you giving me these?" (Hazeline)

"I'm planning to publish them soon, so I need people to proofread them. I shall leave the role of finding the right Wizards for that to you, Miss Hazeline." (Sae-Jin) This was the sign of Bangbae-Dong Wizard approving Hazeline, and was akin to handing over a powerful, decisive weapon over to her as well.

"Take care of the rest, please." (Sae-Jin)

"Yes, yes?! But, where are you going? Mister Sae-Jin, if you just give me these two out of the blue and escape from here, you're putting me in a difficult position, you know?!" (Hazeline) "I'm telling you to use them at your discretion. Besides, Miss Yu-Rin should be arriving soon, so why don't you discuss it between you two?" (Sae-Jin) And with a great timing, Kim Yu-Rin pushed open the door and entered. Sae-Jin left the office as if he was passing the baton over to her.

Kim Yu-Rin called out to him flustered, asking where he was going, but he still resolutely escaped from the office.

Ten days later.

Sae-Jin heard that Hazeline managed to successfully conquer the Wizard Tower quite thoroughly by utilising the grimoires' powers.

But there was no time for him to feel chuffed about that.

Because, he received an urgent text message from Kim Sun-Ho.

And the message said that Kim Yu-Sohn was on the brink.

Sae-Jin dropped everything and hurriedly ran over to the hospital.

"Guild Master."

"You've arrived...?"

There were other Guild members beside Kim Sun-Ho present in

the hospital room.

Sae-Jin had come for a visit less than two weeks ago, yet Kim Yu-Sohn's complexion was incomparably worse compared to before. Sae-Jin could acutely understand the meaning behind the description "nothing but skin and bones".

Sae-Jin sat down on a chair next to Kim Yu-Sohn's hospital bed.

Almost at the same time, the dying man slowly opened his eyes.

And as if he was waiting for this moment, a thin smile spread on his mouth as he stared at Sae-Jin.

Sae-Jin carefully held his skinny, bony hand.

His chest tightened. He felt numb.

Kim Yu-Sohn.

The first person Sae-Jin had ever confided his secrets to, and the person he relied on the most. Looking at him, Sae-Jin once or twice wondered it would have been nice if he had a father like Kim Yu-Sohn.

"....You're truly one stubborn person." (Sae-Jin)

Hearing Sae-Jin's words that contained a myriad of meanings, Kim Yu-Sohn simply returned a smile. Then, he blinked slightly. Sae-Jin placed his ear closer to Kim Yu-Sohn's mouth.

"...You've come." (Kim Yu-Sohn)

"Of course." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin tried to smile. But he couldn't do anything about his trembling voice and tears pooling on the edges of his eyes.

"I had a dream, one after such a long time." (Kim Yu-Sohn)

Sae-Jin's eyes widened instantly.

Kim Yu-Sohn didn't lose his smile while he continued on.

"However... it seems that... you don't have to worry." (Kim Yu-

Sohn) "....Why not?"

"In the near future, a hero will emerge and rescue this world." (Kim Yu-Sohn) Kim Yu-Sohn tightly grasped Sae-Jin's hand.

"And that person... is 'probably'... you, Mister Sae-Jin. It was probably you. That is why... I decided not to worry anymore." (Kim Yu-Sohn) Sae-Jin couldn't understand everything he was saying.

There were lots of things he wanted to ask, too.

To hear what he meant, and to see his healthy face and voice, that's what Sae-Jin wanted.

But, that wasn't possible anymore.

Kim Yu-Sohn simply left behind those enigmatic words, and before Sae-Jin had the chance to comprehend, closed his eyes forever.

"Well... then."

Those were the final words of Kim Yu-Sohn.

"Hah-ah..."

Sae-Jin's long, helpless sigh descended heavily in the room.

"D, dad!!"

Kim Sun-Ho ran up to the hospital bed.

And soon, the sobbing cries of a son who lost his father filled up the room.

Kim Sun-Ho's daughter, not yet a middle schooler, also began sobbing, seeing her father.

On that day, when the sounds of sadness echoed – outside the window, the refreshing yet hot rays of the Summer sun continued to blaze down.

Kim Yu-Sohn's funeral was a simple and small scale affair. Too bad, as if the news of Sae-Jin attending it got spread around, the number of people wanting to attend the occasion was incredible. Of course, Sae-Jin and Kim Sun-Ho refused them all.

Trying to soothe his sadness, Kim Sun Ho jokingly said that if he allowed all of them to attend, then he might have made over a million bucks from people donating money as a sign of their condolences.

But there was this one person they couldn't refuse.

And that was none other than "Emil Rerheu". (TL: Well, the author suddenly switched the name from Emil Rerheu to Emilia. Thus, I will be switching to the latter version as well from here on.) If they refused, she'd murder them all publicly, after all.

"What brings you here?" (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin questioned her while wiping away tears around his eyes. Looking rather exhausted for some reason, Bathory didn't even bother with useless banter before diving into the main topic.

"Hey you, you know a guy called Jin Seh-Hahn?" (Bathory)

".....Sure."

Although he got scared there for a second or two, he replied while maintaining a poker face.

"Did you know that it was el Las Vampires that killed that dude? Anyways, those el Las fools are colluding with the Mah-ins. Looks like there is some kind of secret that even I'm not aware of." (Bathory) Sae-Jin's face hardened.

"Okay, so?"

"What do you mean by, 'okay, so'? I only came here to let you know, so you don't misunderstand about this whole thing, okay? I don't wanna be seen as someone who doesn't keep her promises or something." (Bathory) Bathory spoke thus and coldly turned

around to leave. However, Sae-Jin still had something left to say.

"Since you came all the way out here, let's work together." (Sae-Jin) "....."

Her steps came to a dead stop. However, when she turned around, her cramped face was resembling a terrifying demoness.

"Let's help each other out." (Sae-Jin)

"....You, have you lost your marbles?" (Bathory)

"Well. Wouldn't it be better if we work together? After all, you say the Fissure cannot be closed no matter what. In that case, why not we help each other out?" (Sae-Jin) Sae-Jin smiled confidently.

Bathory stared back at him wordlessly.

However, all those ugly, angry creases on her face from a moment ago had vanished, replaced by her dumbfounded expression.

< 46. Tension (3) > Fin.

Chapter 160: Mah-in (1)

On a river, with a calm breeze gently blowing by.

Sae-Jin accompanied Kim Sun-Ho to the Seom River near the county of Hoengseong. They came here to scatter Kim Yu-Sohn's ashes on the river according to his will.

At the upstream of the river, it was shallow enough to make them wonder whether renting a boat was strictly necessary, but as they neared the midstream, they were glad that they did.

SFX for a small boat cutting through water

The duo moved forward while silently enjoying the sounds their seemingly cobbled-together tiny boat made as it parted the water's surface.

With a soft breeze tickling his face, Sae-Jin stood on the deck and took in the breathtakingly beautiful scenery of the mother nature, the wondrous scenic spots carved out by the flow of the river itself.

"My mom and dad met here for the first time, or so I heard. Dad must've been longing to come here, even in his dreams." (Kim Sun-Ho)

Kim Sun-Ho spoke as he brushed the river's surface with his hand. His voice was drowning in old memories.

Sae-Jin smiled imperceptibly.

"Well, he must have been happy, the place for their first meeting being this beautiful and all." (Sae-Jin)

"Haha... yes, it must be so. Oh, yeah, by the way. I've always thought this, but I'm a lot older than you, Guild Master, yet it feels like you're more mature than I am." (Kim Sun-Ho)

"Hmm... Maybe, it's because I've lost both of my parents a long time ago? It's like, I've learned the life's bitterest lesson very early on in my life.However, hyung-nim. I'm telling you it's okay to

speak plainly with me." (Sae-Jin)

"Eii. I'll get mighty uncomfortable real fast if I do that. Please don't mention that. Ever." (Kim Sun-Ho)

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".....Fuu-woo."
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With the end of that conversation, they didn't speak anymore. They had nothing much to say, anyways. They didn't feel any awkwardness either, however. They simply enjoyed the beautiful sights and the much-needed respite from all the madness plaguing the world lately.

And as they silently let the time tick away, Kim Sun-Ho suddenly asked him a question.

"Should we do this together?" (Kim Sun-Ho)

He was talking about the ashes. Sae-Jin smiled bitterly and shook his head.

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"No, that should be Mister Sun-Ho's role." (Sae-Jin)
"....."
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Kim Sun-Ho nodded his head without saying a word. Then, he scattered the ashes of his father on the river. The grey-white ashes floated innocently on the surface and soon, descended to the floor, disappearing from the view.

And at the same time, a single tear drop formed on the eye of Kim Sun-Ho and gleamed like a lone star, as he continued to look on at the disappearing ashes.

Sae-Jin quickly averted his gaze.

As if the distant trees dotting the mountainside had felt the encroaching Autumn, their leaves were being dyed in a cacophony of colours.

Sae-Jin understood why Kim Yu-Sohn wanted his ashes scattered around here.

Sae-Jin returned to his everyday life while still unable to shake off that forlorn emotion clinging on to him. He'd like to take a good rest after his mind got frayed a lot recently, yet his surroundings didn't let him have one. As ever, the chaotic world demanded lots of things from him – artifacts, weapons, Mercenaries, Griffins, potions, and now, even grimoires...

"Ah, I almost forgot. Oppa, they say Hero Orcs have been found alive." (Yu Sae-Jung)

After Sae-Jin ended his business call with Jo Hahn-Sung, Yu Sae-Jung laid her head down on his lap, before telling him this news. Immediately, Sae-Jin snapped out from the mental fatigue and opened his eyes wide.

"Really?" (Sae-Jin)

"Ng. I hear they rescued another young Knight recently." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Around where?" (Sae-Jin)

He thought they had all died after getting mixed up in that huge explosion. Well, in that battle against the Three-Headed Ogre, the site of the Orc village got obliterated, after all.

"Apparently, near where their old village used to be. I hear they are rebuilding it from the ground up." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"......What a relief." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin breathed out a sigh of relief. He thought that he should go there soon, since he was looking for a capable substitute to mass produce weapons for him.

Yu Sae-Jung studied him with curious eyes before continuing on with her eyes.

"Ah, right. Oppa, didn't you say you have something important

to do today?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"I've postponed it." (Sae-Jin)

"....Ng? But was that something you can postpone that easily? Didn't you say you were going to meet the Spanish Ambassador?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

To be more specific, it wasn't the Ambassador, but the Prime Minister of Spain. The meeting was to discuss a variety of matters including reaching an agreement regarding potion supply, as well as to finalise all the deals, and that was why the Spanish Prime Minister saw fit to personally fly over here.

Unfortunately, the timing sucked as Kim Yu-Sohn had passed on so the date had to be postponed somewhat.

"It couldn't be helped. You also know why, right?" (Sae-Jin)

Kim Yu-Sohn was an official member of The Monster Guild. Plus, he was also the very first Director of Operations for the Mercenary Company as well, meaning that many newspapers had to express their condolences on his passing on the front pages of their publications.

Thinking about him made Sae-Jin even more depressed.

Letting go of an important person was, indeed, a painful thing to do.

"Oppa?"

Yu Sae-Jung lifted her head after seeing the shadow descend upon Sae-Jin's expressions.

".....Uh, uh?"

She then pushed him down in the blink of an eye. After he fell down on the bed, a pair of rather soft sensations pressed down on his face.

He'd been wondering for a while now, but seriously, her twins had definitely grown bigger than when he first met her. Did she get an operation or something...?

"I heard that guys like it when girls do this." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Sae-Jin chuckled after hearing her praise-worthy words.

"You learned something nice." (Sae-Jin)

He wrapped his arms around her waist, while she hugged his head tightly.

Now that he was rubbing his face on a pair so soft and wonderful, a pair that made him happy simply by looking at them, his depressed mind seemed to regain some of its former brightness.

"By the way, they seem to be a bit bigger than before?" (Sae-Jin)

"....I borrowed my Trait's powers a little bit. And I plan to do so from now on, too." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Yu Sae-Jung declared resolutely. Sae-Jin guffawed out and closed his eyes shut. His head settled down, and as he felt relaxed, sleep began to creep up on him.

And just as he slowly drifted towards the bliss of slumber...

Out of the blue, Yu Sae-Jung's sharp, questioning voice cut into his dimming consciousness.

"Ah, that's right. Oppa, aren't you meeting up with Knight Kim Yu-Rin way too often these days?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"....Slurp, what are you talking about?" (Sae-Jin)

And he was about to fall asleep, too. Sae-Jin slurped back his drool and shook his head.

"You've been eating out with her frequently, right? Also taking lots of photos, too. At this rate, you might get to start a scandal way before me, don't you think so?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

Up until a minute ago, she was the very personification of 'model wife', yet now, she was being sarcastic while glaring at him. Since she was looking down on him, it was kind of threatening for some

reason. However, he still found her rather adorable.

Sae-Jin grinned and shook his head again.

"It's simply because of work." (Sae-Jin)

He couldn't help it – he had no one else beside Kim Yu-Rin to discuss things with. He didn't have much to talk about with the currently-bereaved Kim Sun-Ho, Hazeline was crazy-busy with the daily operations of the Wizard Tower, while Yu Baek-Song was just too childish. But on the other hand, Kim Yu-Rin was rich with experience having taken command on many different missions, plus she instilled confidence and trust as well.

If she was a man, then Sae-Jin would've worshipped him as a true hyung-nim.

"Seriously, it's always 'work'." (Yu Sae-Jung)

While complaining that she had yet another rival to watch out for, Yu Sae-Jung pulled out her phone. At first, she loitered around Sae-Jin's SNS profile with its over 150 million followers, before beginning her spying operation on Kim Yu-Rin's profile that only had one-tenth of his followers.

Out of ten photos recently uploaded on the profile, eight of them were taken with Sae-Jin present. And it was said that Kim Yu-Rin's followers rapidly increased precisely because of this.

"Wah, this is so unbelievable. Look, what is this? I never imagined Seuseung-nim would be like this, but this is just too much. She's got more than three million followers than me." (Yu Sae-Jung) (TL: a seuseung-nim is similar to "sensei" in Japanese. However, in this context, it's being used sarcastically. No idea why the term was invoked here, though – not like Kim Yu-Rin taught Yu Sae-Jung anything...)

"And what's bothering you so much like this..." (Sae-Jin)

"It's fine. Please be quiet." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Blurting out a blunt answer, Yu Sae-Jung stopped looking at SNS and moved on to news channels. She wanted to see if there were any stories that might sounded like a scandalous gossip, but rather than that, she found something else just as interesting instead.

".....Ah, excuse me, Oppa? A mass armed unrest broke out in Spain just now." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Eh? Why?" (Sae-Jin)

"Hmm... 'Due to the inept diplomatic skills of the leaders, the meeting with Kim Sae-Jin has been cancelled, and so...' Uhm, Oppa, is Spain going to be alright at this rate?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

""

Two of them remained silent afterwards.

It turned out, having a renowned fame and being able to influence the world wasn't all roses and happy smiles.

Sae-Jin hurriedly held the promised meeting with the Spanish Prime Minister. The PM wasn't someone who could move his schedule around that easily, yet he came running over in less than the proverbial single breath.

During this hurried-up meeting, the deal to export potions, several weapons of the Orc Blacksmith, as well as lending of Griffins got finalised. And so, Sae-Jin got to receive the Spanish PM's heartfelt thanks, and hear the news regarding the unrest in Spain finally coming under control.

Really, it was a huge relief.

But he still didn't have time to take it easy. That question he threw quite carelessly at the funeral, well, Bathory ended up saying yes to it. She then came to see him in the underground conference room on the following week.

"Hiya." (Bathory)

" "

When Bathory stepped into the conference room, thick silence fell.

"What is going on...?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

Yi Hye-Rin cautiously asked. Sae-Jin shrugged his shoulders and pointed at the newspaper on top of the conference table. On the headline, big letters shouting out 'Mah-in, another one appears' were clearly written for all to see.

"No way, that woman is responsible for that, too...?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

"Hey, you've got a bad mouth on ya, haven't you. Who's 'that woman' here?" (Bathory)

"Hiiieeeck."

Bathory approached her while showing a bit of anger. Yi Hye-Rin couldn't even meet her gaze and simply trembled in fear.

"You don't have to get scared, though? She's here to lend us a helping hand. Look at it as her repaying the favour of us successfully killing the Lord back then." (Sae-Jin)

"Right. That's correct. I don't wanna become a Lord who can't keep her promises, you see. I also don't like what the idiots of el Las are doing, either." (Bathory)

Bathory sat down on her seat. Then, crossed her legs and leaned her back on the seatback. But, before she could say something, her eyes radiated a dangerous glint after finding Cornlak lying on the conference room floor.

She fake coughed a couple times, and took a long look at Cornlak, before turning her head towards Sae-Jin's direction. She slowly asked him.

"....Who does this creature belong to?" (Bathory)

"Ah, well, he's the result from one of my Skills. For now, he's

like the conference room NPC." (Sae-Jin)

"Is that so?" (Bathory)

Bathory licked her lips seductively. Her eyes were full of avarice.

"Give it to me." (Bathory)

"No, you mustn't!!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Suddenly, Kim Yu-Rin shot up from her seat and shouted out. Even Bathory got stunned by her boldness.

"....What the heck?" (Bathory)

"What do you mean, a conference room NPC? Cornlak is our family!!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

She shouted out passionately, and embraced Cornlak. Although it looked more like she was currently captured by a giant wolf instead, but whatever, her actions seemed quite desperate nonetheless. As if this whole thing seemed ridiculous, Bathory broke out in a hollow chuckle.

"Huh. What's up with her..." (Bathory)

"No, you can't!!" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin shouted out even louder. Unfortunately for her, though – that was the wrong response in this case. Now normally, a personality where wanting to forcibly take away something precious from someone would be referred to as 'rotten', and well, Bathory was the shining beacon of a such rotten personality.

Bathory's face hardened into a terrifying expression and she stood up from her seat. Then, with a threatening voice, she matter-of-factly handed down an order.

"....Give it to me. Right now." (Bathory)

And so, for a short while, a tussle broke out over Cornlak's fate.

The clash over Cornlak's ownership ended in Bathory's favour.

Bathory got drunk on the euphoria of victory and a sense of superiority while looking at the unstoppably sobbing Kim Yu-Rin, but Sae-Jin simply cancelled the summoning as soon as Bathory returned home with Cornlak, and then summoned the giant wolf back into the conference room.

Not too long after that, Bathory contacted him with a somewhat apologetic voice, saying that Cornlak must've ran away from her home.

Regardless of what transpired afterwards, Sae-Jin still deployed The Monster's information network using the info Bathory had brought along.

And since the intelligence operatives of The Monster possessed excellent capabilities, the whereabouts of the el Las were uncovered pretty quickly.

The fake identity of the el Las's leader was the son of some pharmaceutical company's CEO. And his retainers were 'employees' of the said company.

"So, what are you going to do now?" (Bathory)

Bathory asked Sae-Jin, and his head tilted slightly as he asked back.

"What were you thinking of doing?" (Sae-Jin)

"Kill them all, obviously." (Bathory)

"....Don't you have any other thoughts besides 'kill' or 'let them live' in your head?" (Sae-Jin)

"Well, do you have a better whatever? Don't take us Vampires too lightly, you." (Bathory)

Sae-Jin dumbfoundedly stared at Bathory for a bit, before extracting an energy bar from his pocket.

"What's this?" (Bathory)

"You hungry?" (Sae-Jin)

"....Not really." (Bathory)

"Then feed it to one of your subordinates." (Sae-Jin)

From Bathory's perspective, this was no different than some unexpected dog's bark, so her face crumpled quite badly.

"And why should I?" (Bathory)

"This is food exclusively developed for Vampires. As long as I can solve the issue of sustenance, you don't have to return to your former world, am I right?" (Sae-Jin)

"....What did you just say?" (Bathory)

Sae-Jin expected to be beaten up somewhat by her, with her saying that he had crossed the line needlessly or some such.

"...You lost your bloody mind, haven't you?" (Bathory)

Unfortunately, on that day...

Kim Sae-Jin was beaten to a pulp, right up to the death's doorstep. No, he really, seriously got beaten up until inches from dying. If he didn't have potions, he might have really kicked the bucket from trauma alone.

Bathory also felt the same pain as Sae-Jin felt, yet she didn't stay her hands. Not at all.

Only then did Sae-Jin realise the important fact – that was, the 'home world' was her so-called reverse scale. He should never, ever broach this subject at all.

At the end, she ruthlessly stepped on the back of Sae-Jin, who was lying sprawled on the floor like a corpse, and announced that she would cancel their cooperation deal if he pulled another c**p like this, before leaving him there.

<47. Mah-in (1) > Fin.

Chapter 161: Mah-in (2)

The el Las used the Vampire-specific approach of sleep deprivation and mind control magic to make success of their many business ventures. Among those ventures, several were famous enough for many a job seeker to recognise their names outright. Truly, it was the case of 'the base of an oil lamp is the darkest'.

A certain day in the middle of October.

Sae-Jin deliberately went for a day out near the vicinity of the pharmaceutical company owned by the el Las. Outwardly, it was to hold a business meeting, but the truth was, it was in order to snatch an important figure from the ranks of the el Las clan.

After ending the "sham" meeting with the Dawn's representatives, Sae-Jin and his bodyguard for the day, Kim Yu-Rin, headed off to a restaurant well known to the locals. Named [The Master of Seafood], this sushi restaurant was positioned in such a way that the pharmaceutical company's front entrance was clearly visible from Sae-Jin's seat.

"Guild Master, will you please look over here?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

As he studied the company's front view via the restaurant's windows, Kim Yu-Rin, sitting in front, called out to him. When he took a glance, she was pointing the camera lens on her phone towards his direction.

"Say cheese~."

Sae-Jin forced the corners of his lips to rise, and sure enough, with a soft click, she took a photo.

As if she was satisfied with the resulting shot, she nodded her head and moved her fingers quite rapidly. He didn't have to look to know what she was doing right now. She was uploading the pic to her SNS profile.

"....You seem to be really active in SNS nowadays." (Sae-Jin)

He spoke in a courteous voice that featured a spoonful of sarcasm as well. She finished uploading the photo, and then formed a wry smile while scratching the back of her neck.

"Ah, well, the thing is, I only started this because the Knights Order asked me to... But after I entered The Monster Guild and started uploading photos taken with Guild Master, the number of my followers suddenly exploded upwards. And I've got over ten million now... So, like, I can't disappoint all my loyal followers now, can I?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Sae-Jin chuckled loudly after hearing an excuse that could have only come from Kim Yu-Rin.

"You must find it enjoyable, then." (Sae-Jin)

"....Yup. This, it's a whole new different world." (Kim Yu-Rin)

After adding "there are always reasons why a medium would take off", she returned to her phone. She was checking out the reactions of the followers that were popping up in real time.

"Still, please do it in moderation. Sae-Jung is worried about a scandal breaking out between you and I." (Sae-Jin)

"Eiii, which dumb reporter would dare to 'cause' a scandal with you, Guild Master?Ah, also, please consider what you've done in the past. You should be ready to endure this much, at least." (Kim Yu-Rin)

....Well, with that reasoning, Sae-Jin had no excuse to offer. What he did was no different from making an utter fool out of her by swapping back and forth between the Orc Form and the human's appearance. He should be grateful that she forgave him without resorting to performing acts of violence on his person.

"...Cough. Do what you like. I'll even let you take a photo of me without a shirt on, if you want." (Sae-Jin)

"Fuu fuu fuu. Thank you very much~." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin formed a pretty smile before snapping yet another photo.

Seriously, after she began doing SNS, and also after giving up on the future Guild Master position, she had become twice as more outgoing than before. Since such a thing was quite charming to behold, he thought it was kind of troubling, though.

And so, they chatted for the next ten minutes, and just as the ordered food filled up their dining table...

Employees began streaming out from the company as the office hours drew to a close.

Sae-Jin activated the Eyes of the Wolf and studied all the faces as thoroughly as he could. And as expected, just about every one of the employees emitted a very faint trace of blood, with the imperceptible dark energy hovering right above them.

"They are indeed Vampires, alright. I don't know how many are within the company itself, but 153 is a seriously high number, wouldn't you say?" (Sae-Jin)

"Right, that is correct, but.... Was there a need for you to personally come here today?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Unfortunately, the intelligence operatives can't distinguish Vampires all that well." (Sae-Jin)

He had developed a tool to suss out Vampires way back when, but somehow, they had figured out a cunning method to evade detection.

It was then.

Sae-Jin discovered a b*stard with a particularly strong scent of blood as well as possessing an overwhelming amount of dark energy. And this sense of incongruity was coming off from an imported luxury saloon car driving past the front of the sushi joint.

He hurriedly pulled out the communication crystal to inform the

waiting operatives hidden somewhere.

"The man riding on that Ferrache – the aura coming off from that guy is the strongest. Make him your primary target, please." (TL: Lol. Ferrache. The author knows how to skirt copyright issues...)

He heard the confirmation coming from the crystal. Sae-Jin lowered his chopsticks and stood up.

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"Let's get going as well." (Sae-Jin)
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"…??"

But Kim Yu-Rin tilted her head.

"But there's so much food left, though?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Eh?"

True, there were quite a lot of stuff they hadn't finished yet, but they actually didn't come here to eat...

The wide-eyed Kim Yu-Rin hurriedly waved her hands around, telling him not to misunderstand her intentions.

"No, no, I'm not saying we should finish everything here, but it's just that, vacating our seats so early might rouse suspicions, you know? Besides, kidnapping the target is the role of the operatives, anyway." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"......Hmm."

Since what she said made sense, somewhat, Sae-Jin sat back down again. And he slowly began savouring the raw sushi.

About twenty minutes later, all that sushi filling up the table was gone.

Sae-Jin only got to eat around ten pieces. The rest entered Kim Yu-Rin's tummy. Seriously now, wasn't this some sort of public crime to shove four portions of sushi with every gulp?

Whatever the case may have been, after safely negotiating

through the meal somehow, Sae-Jin settled the bill and they headed off to the parking lot.

"Please get in.... What the?!" (Sae-Jin)

But when he turned around while holding the car's door open, Kim Yu-Rin wasn't there.

When he searched around for her, he saw her hurriedly running towards his position, and for some reason, her arms were full of 'hot bars', too. (TL: Fish cake bars are called "hot bars" in Korea. Google it, it looks rather delicious.)

"I spotted them on the way, and they smelled nice, so.... Would you like some?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

As soon as Sae-Jin looked at her with disbelieving eyes, Kim Yu-Rin shyly replied and cautiously offered a hot bar to him.

However, an expression that said 'I wanna eat them, so refuse my offer' was written very large on her face.

He wasn't planning to eat one anyways, but... he still received it. Indeed, she seemed to have asked him out of courtesy, because she began pouting almost immediately. Sae-Jin smirked and returned the hot bar back to her.

"I need to drive." (Sae-Jin)

"Ah, what a pity. I shall finish them for you, then." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Her face softened right away.

"Please, get in." (Sae-Jin)

As he switched on the ignition, a communication arrived on the crystal.

- "We've secured the target."

"Oh? Already?" (Sae-Jin)

"Chomp, chomp. As eespeted of de Monsta's opheratibes. Reely ekseptional." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"....Please speak after you finish chewing, first." (Sae-Jin)

*

Right next day.

The kidnapped member of the el Las clan, the young Elder 'Daniel Kim' told them everything after falling under the control of Bathory's mind magic.

"It seems that, the ones responsible for summoning Doo-Urk-Shi-Nees in America back then were the agents of el Las, and that Jin Seh-Hahn also perished at their hands as well." (Kim Sun-Ho)

"Is that true?" (Sae-Jin)

Receiving Kim Sun-Ho's report, Sae-Jin's head tilted in confusion. It seemed that pretty much every incident that happened to him was the handiwork of the el Las, so he couldn't help but wonder just what the Bathorys were doing until now.

"Yes, boss. We also learned that nearly half of the upper echelons of Eden are under the el Las's grip as well. Using the records of Eden, they approached Mah-ins, and on the location right under the pharmaceutical company building, they are researching the methods to rip open the Fissure wider with the participating Mah-ins. Those Mah-ins that caused unrest are the ones that found the research frustrating and ran away from the facility."

Kim Sun-Ho handed over the documents containing the relevant information.

This much was enough. By submitting this evidence to the government, Sae-Jin would be able to earn their cooperation in catching the members of the el Las clan.

But the problem was what to do with them afterwards. How would they deal with that many Vampires?

And he sure as hell didn't feel like quietly slaughtering them in some remote location just like what Bathory had suggested.

"That's right. What's happening with that project?" (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin asked, as a thought popped up in his head during his mullings of the troublesome future. About a month ago, TM submitted to the Korean government its plans to supply the 'energy bars' to the incarcerated Vampires.

"I need to ask Mister Jo Hahn-Sung for a more detailed report, but.... starting from next week, they are planning to replace the swine blood with the bars, or so I hear." (Kim Sun-Ho)

"Oh, that sounds promising." (Sae-Jin)

Vampires only drank human blood and didn't even spare a glance at the livestock blood at all. Most of the public criticised such clear display of arrogance, but if one were to take into account Vampires' unusual 'eating habits', such a thing couldn't be helped, really.

Even humans wouldn't touch the literal sh*t just because of their hunger. To Vampires, animal blood was even more disgusting than excrements of humans.

"That sure is a relief to hear. And we're almost done with developing various different flavours, yes?" (Sae-Jin)

"Yes, boss. By utilising the Wizards working in the Wizard Tower, the speed of research has been increased by a huge margin, apparently. Oh, and the flavour of the energy bars to be supplied to the prison is grilled pork belly." (Kim Sun-Ho)

"Very good." (Sae-Jin)

With a satisfied smile, Sae-Jin leaned back on the chair.

His goal wasn't too far now.

As long as he could coax Bathory, as long as he could turn that nonsensical power into the ally of humanity...

He would be able to make the words of the dying Vampire Lord come true – 'the monster, Bathory, will become the hero.'

And a week later, the news of energy bars being supplied to the only prison in the country designed to imprison Vampires, the Gunsan, got circulated in the media.

Even the public that debated endlessly on whether to kill every single Vampire out there, or to reconcile with those who could, watched with great deal of interest on the success of this mysterious energy bar.

Two weeks later, the warden of the Gunsan Penitentiary stepped in front of the gathered reporters to speak about the results.

Even Sae-Jin made an unprecedented appearance to this specially-prepared room for the press conference located in the prison. Unfortunately for the warden, he was under dizzying pressure after having a man reputedly possessing more influence than the country's president stand before him.

The warden rubbed his pounding chest and swallowed nervously. He even took in several deep breaths before finally opening his mouth.

"I believe that the interest in this matter is quite exceptional, so I shall get right to the topic.On the first day of supplying the energy bars from TM to the prisoners, as expected, Vampires refused to comply." (Warden)

Several reporters who had prematurely determined that the experiment was a failure let off sighs of lamentation.

"But, through hard work of the guards, a few Vampires began eating the bars." (Warden)

'Hard work'.

That was written on the script. But the warden chose to not follow it.

"....No, truthfully, we forcibly fed it to them." (Warden)

Camera flashes went off like crazy.

"And we have been doing that for a week." (Warden)

The warden took his time, causing the gathered people to hold their breaths as well.

"And then, Vampires began voluntarily asking for the energy bars on their own." (Warden)

As the warden spoke with a smile on his face, the sounds of reporters cheering on rang around the conference room. Sae-Jin confirmed that the warden wasn't lying and breathed out in relief as well.

Kuongkwahng, kuongkwang -

Sae-Jin did his best to calm his wildely pounding heart.

"Of course, we do not know whether this change is because the only thing they could compare to is the blood of livestock, but, I can say that the prisoners have expressed their satisfaction in the energy bars. They say it tastes better than human blood." (Warden)

That was expected. Vampires had never ever tasted any other type of food before, so the taste of grilled pork belly must've been an eye opener to them.

"And so, here we are, two weeks later. The number of riots that break out in a daily basis has decreased from the highs of several dozens to barely one. And those are the works of new prisoners who haven't tasted the energy bars yet." (Warden)

Sae-Jin couldn't control his surging emotions and ended up clapping his hands. Even the politicians that had followed and took up the seats right beside him smiled brightly and clapped their hands as well.

"We are told that the purpose of incarceration is to rehabilitate the convicted criminals. But, serving as the warden of the prison dedicated to Vampires, I always found such an opinion sceptical at best. For the first time in my life, I thought that very idea, the one about rehabilitating Vampires, might work." (Warden)

The warden ended the press conference with those words and climbed off the stage. Then, he reached out to shake Sae-Jin's hand while saying how grateful he was. The politicians, full of smiles until now, suddenly became all venom-eyed and reacted over the top, questioning how dare he do that, but Sae-Jin ignored them and firmly grasped the warden's hand.

"Thank you, for all your hard work." (Sae-Jin)

Hearing Sae-Jin's praise, the warden resolutely shook his head.

"No, sir. It's me who should be thanking you." (Warden)

Without a doubt, this handshake was being broadcast through various TV stations in real time.

What would Vampires, most importantly Bathory, be thinking about while watching this moment play out?

Sae-Jin couldn't wait to find out.

< 47. Mah-in (2) > Fin.

Chapter 162: Mah-in (3)

"Oh, it's indeed quite delicious. This is so unreal." (Rhosrahdel)

Rhosrahdel continued to speak words of praise as he diligently chewed on the energy bar. Him of less than five minutes ago that busy threw a tantrum not wanting to eat one of those, was like a completely different person from another dimension compared to now.

"Is it more delicious than a blood pack?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

Yi Hye-Rin, with her eyes going round in curiosity, asked him.

"Well, it is far cheaper, that's for sure." (Rhosrahdel)

Until now, Rhosrahdel had purchased – through definitely legal means – blood packs and used them for sustenance. However, the expense was quite enormous. Five packs a day would come down to way past \$9000 every month just for his food bills....

"It's a flavour I've never tasted before, so I do find it quite interesting. But, I also think it could get a bit monotonous after a while. You said this is the grilled pork flavour?" (Rhosrahdel)

"Yeah. I think the taste's really close. But seriously now, you can't eat normal food, like, ever?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

"Yes. If I eat 'normal food', I will die because I won't be able to digest them properly." (Rhosrahdel)

To be more specific, regular food couldn't be digested and would continuously pile up within the digestive tract, until causing his death through suffocation.

Yi Hye-Rin got shocked by the revelation and hurriedly asked.

"You'll really die?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

"Of course." (Rhosrahdel)

"....Uh-whew."

Yi Hye-Rin's expression crumpled. She always thought that enjoying good food was one of the life's greatest repeatable joys, so such a thing sounded like an unenviable fate to her.

It was around here that Joo Ji-Hyuk decided to cut in between the two sharing a rather intimate chat, after observing the duo with an uncomfortable face.

"I think that if you commercialise this energy bar amongst the army and Knights Order personnel, they will really latch on to this." (Joo Ji-Hyuk)

Sae-Jin shrugged his shoulders before answering him.

"Oh, right. Yes, I might do just that. I'm thinking about it." (Sae-Jin)

Invented through mobilising all the top-tier artifacts from TM as well as its talented workforce, this energy bar's pricing was set at \$6000 (\$5.58) each, limited only to Vampires. Since this price was deliberately set low in order to ensure the buyers would get to eat three meals a day, the profit earned was nearly zero when all the capital invested in the project was taken into account.

"But if I do decide to sell it to the public, then the price will be higher than the amount set for the Vampires."

The Wizards of the Wizard Tower are being worked full-time at the moment, and because of their profession being what it was, there was no helping with their high labour cost at the moment.

For now, a certain bait was being dangled in front, the one that promised one of the Bangbae-Dong grimoires number 1 to 10 could be rented out without going through the waiting period, if the Wizard put in 100 hours manufacturing the bars. But still, the profession of Wizards was one of the high-flying careers that demanded a minimum of \$100 thousand as yearly salary, so...

Joo Ji-Hyuk stared at the energy bar with greedy eyes and asked again.

"Then, pricing it how much would get you a profit margin? We at Dawn should purchase a whole bunch, no matter how much one costs. I mean, hunger is an enemy we can't ignore during those raids that take a long time to complete." (Joo Ji-Hyuk)

".....Hmm. I should ask Mister Hahn-Sung for a more detailed info, but well, around ₩50000 per bar? (\$46.50) Maybe there, or a bit more." (Sae-Jin)

"Oh. In that case, I'd like to buy a few for myself, as well as for my subordinates." (Joo Ji-Hyuk)

Subordinates.

When Joo Ji-Hyuk climbed up to the position of the top Knight in his order, he also became the so-called Captain of a team. Naturally, he commanded around fifteen subordinates now. As a result, his pride and sense of duty had become even more pronounced compared to before.

Sae-Jin smiled brightly as he gazed at Joo Ji-Hyuk.

"Your subordinates must be glad to have you as their superior officer." (Sae-Jin)

A smile spread on Joo Ji-Hyuk's lips as well. Meanwhile, Yi Hye-Rin's face blushed a bit as she glanced at him.

Seeing these two, who had been openly flirting yet went absolutely nowhere fast until now, Sae-Jin felt slightly frustrated in his heart.

*

The average number of energy bars produced in a day totalled 600 thousand. Considering that the number of Vampires living in around the world amounted to roughly 200 thousand, one could say they shouldn't worry about lack of supplies for having three meals a day.

However, it was inevitable that there would be hardline

Vampires who refused to eat these energy bars. So, in order to dispose of the leftover stock that came about after supplying the willing buyers, Sae-Jin asked Knights Orders if they were interested as well.

The Dawn and the Raven Knights Orders were the first to order over 20 thousand bars for their personnel. When this news got around, many overseas Orders tripped over themselves to get to TM's checkout counter as quickly as possible.

The pricing for one energy bar was set at ₩70000. (\$65.10)

The business venture that had very little prospect for profit, suddenly began generating some amount of revenue stream.

Also, rumours of rift forming within the Vampire society due to the advent of this energy bar could be heard as well.

The reason for them wanting to return to their homeworld – the main reason why they ended up rejecting the society, had been solved out of the blue, so perhaps this development was the obvious next step.

Unfortunately for Sae-Jin, no matter how long he waited, he hadn't received any word from the most important Vampire of them all, Bathory.

"....There hasn't been any contact from Bathory's side, yes?" (Sae-Jin)

Currently, inside the underground conference room, where all of The Monster's agendas were decided.

Sae-Jin asked Kim Sun-Ho.

"Yes, boss. Other than handing over a map with the coordinates for the el Las's underground research centre through Rhosrahdel, there has been none." (Kim Sun-Ho)

"Hmm.... By the way, exactly how many members are there in the Bathory clan?" (Sae-Jin) "Two thousand living in Korea, and over ten thousand if all the indirect relations around the world are counted, boss." (Kim Sun-Ho)

"That's more than I expected." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin was slightly taken aback. Since she didn't seem to have too many active 'agents', he expected the overall numbers to be low as well.

"What about the rest?" (Sae-Jin)

"The el Las is thirty thousand..." (Kim Sun-Ho)

"There are fifty thousand of us. Twenty thousand are outside Korea, but after receiving news that the underground city has been completed, they are entering the country as soon as they can." (Lillia)

Lillia replied instead of Kim Sun-Ho while sitting on the corner of the couch. As expected of the Nosferatus – he did think that there were a lot more Vampires in the underground city of late.

Kim Sun-Ho took a glance at her and then continued.

"...Yes, boss, she's correct. The rest are Vampires not affiliated with any other clans, and a fair number of them happen to be inmates, as well." (Kim Sun-Ho)

"So that's how it is.... Oh, before I forget, Miss Lillia, which date did you say the Nosferatus would hold a press conference?" (Sae-Jin)

Lillia assumed a bright smile at Sae-Jin's query.

"In a week's time. I'm assuming you'll be in attendance?" (Lillia)

Through a democratic process, Nosferatus had decided to publicly announce their intention to adopt the energy bars as their main source of sustenance and to integrate back into human society.

Their plan also included opening up their rather stunning

underground city to the outsiders and earn tourist avenue, which would aid in creating a sustainable Vampire society in the long term – after the Goblin village have been moved elsewhere, of course.

"Yes, of course." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin replied in a reliable manner. At the same time, the message arrived that the Knights such as Kim Yu-Rin, Yi Hye-Rin, and Joo Ji-Hyuk, had entered the Guild building after finishing their duties for the day.

"Well then, let us get the meeting started – to find the way to take care of all the Mah-ins." (Sae-Jin)

*

In a dark room where a thick veil seemingly covered up everything, there was a single light source still existing within. It was the television, a wonderful box that helped to alleviate Bathory's boredom for a considerable length of time.

Even today, yesterday, and also two days ago.

From the rectangular box, the news of 'TM has invented energy bars that can be eaten by Vampires' continued to leak out.

Bathory was dazedly watching the footage play on.

Footages showing the process of how the energy bars were manufactured, and a Vampire eating the bar; even the footages showing the interviews with the incarcerated Vampires – all of them were showing happy, smiling faces that said the day when the humanity and Vampires reconcile wasn't too far away.

- "This food will spread out to the rest of the world, with a sensible price, and for establishing a harmonious society for us all."

With that final comment, footages came to an end. Bathory remained dazed as she stared at the TV screen for a long, long time.

Five minutes, ten minutes...

The ticking of the clock seemed monotonous yet very clear within this darkness.

Bathory finally opened her mouth after a lengthy deliberation.

"Hey, everyone."

Her targets this time were the convoy of Apostles always 'protecting' her. Actually, the Elders should have been performing this role, but there were none here. Bathory killed them all. Many of them chose the deceased Vampire Lord over the head of the clan, after all.

"Yes, my lady."

The eldest Apostle replied to her.

"What do you think about?" (Bathory)

"....Of course, we should strive to return to our homeworld, my lady."

The Apostle's voice was trembling imperceptibly. It was the sign that, although he was sincere in his belief, he was being shaken at the same time.

"...So it is." (Bathory)

Bathory murmured bitterly and pointed at the TV. From her smooth, refined finger, a thin red stream of energy leaked out and entered the TV. And flames erupted from its inside.

The TV that spat out uncomfortable news until not too long ago became a heap of ash in the blink of an eye.

*

After returning home, Sae-Jin sat on the bed while he waited for Yu Sae-Jung to come home as well. He was planning to tell her that old excuse about him going on a business trip for a couple of days – since he'd be participating in the cleaning up of the Mah-in threat.

However...

She didn't want to show up, no matter how long he waited.

Seven o'clock, eight, nine, ten, then eleven...

The longer the hours ticked on, the hotter his head boiled, and his fists were clenching tighter automatically.

But finally, when the hour hand of the clock was about to touch '12' – and just as Sae-Jin grabbed his phone after his anger finally erupted out...

SFX for a door stealthily opening up

The front door opened slightly.

And cautious footsteps even quieter than dust settling on the floor entered his ears.

Sae-Jin deliberately withheld his presence in the main bedroom.

Her footsteps seemed to circle around living room, bathroom and then, the kitchen. He then heard her breathe a sigh of relief as if she had confirmed that there was no one else in the house.

She must be under the mistaken belief that he was yet to return home, as Sae-Jin told her he was really busy nowadays.

"Ah, I'm so tiiiired~."

Sae-Jin heard her slurred voice coming from just beyond the bedroom door. Just how much did she drink? His eyes narrowed to a sharp blade while glaring at the door. They resembled that of a wild predator, waiting for a prey to show up.

SFX for a door creaking open

"Yawn~..."

The door opened.

Yu Sae-Jung entered the room while leisurely yawning out, but then...

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"@#%^!!!"
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She fell down on her b**t after discovering Sae-Jin sitting in the dark like a demon.

"O, Oppa, you were home already?!" (Yu Sae-Jung)

With one hand, she hurriedly tidied up her messy hair, while with the other, she hid her reddened face as her slurred, stuttering words rolled out. Sae-Jin wordlessly glared at her.

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" "
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"Ah, uh, the thing is, I, uh, I ran into my old classmates and it's been a long time, so... It was such a nice little surprise so like, we were having fun and ended up, uh, a bit late than usual~?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

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" "
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He still maintained his silence.

"I, I can also have a fun day out, you know. Besides, I didn't stay out the whole night, right? It's still, uh, 11:59 now, there's still a minute left! A whole minute! And you always stay out overnight, too..." (Yu Sae-Jung)

She showed him the time with her phone.

Still, Sae-Jin didn't say anything.

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"That.... Uh...." (Yu Sae-Jung)
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" "
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"Please say something. Did I do something hugely wrong here?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

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" "
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".....Sorry." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Fut."

Sae-Jin ended up chuckling at her rapid apology. As if Yu Sae-

Jung was relieved as well, she sneaked up closer to the bed.

"...I'm home~." (Yu Sae-Jung)

She entered Sae-Jin's embrace while acting all aegyo and stuff. He asked her while gently rubbing her back.

"A reunion, huh? Did you have fun?" (Sae-Jin)

"Ng. I ended up recalling so many good memories, since I haven't seen them in such a long time." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Really? I thought you didn't have a lot of friends." (Sae-Jin)

".....But I do, four of them, as a matter of fact." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Having four friends as the only grandchild of a Chaebol, now that was a lot. Oh yes, it sure was – Yu Sae-Jung declared as so and justified her reasoning.

"Oh, right. Don't you have meetings regarding the Wizard Tower scheduled?" (Sae-Jin)

"Yeah, I do, but why do you ask?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"I got worried. I need to go on a business trip this week, but I am worried about you drinking way too much and then fooling around..." (Sae-Jin)

"....I ain't gonna do that, so stop worrying." (Yu Sae-Jung)

For a second there, did her eyes gleam rather dangerously?

"You seem to meet a lot of people lately?" (Sae-Jin)

"Ng. Lots of fun things are happening all the time now. There are the Guild meetings, then there are those Wizard Tower directors' conference, too.... It's all because of Oppa's hard work." (Yu Sae-Jung) (TL: Quite frankly, none of those sound particularly fun to me, but whatever, different strokes for different folks and all that...)

Sae-Jin smiled and patted her head.

"In that case, life should still be fun even without me around, am

I right?" (Sae-Jin)

"....What the heck." (Yu Sae-Jung)

He was only joking, but Yu Sae-Jung's expressions rapidly cooled. It was a serious look completely devoid of any mischievousness that could be seen maybe once or twice in a year.

"Obviously, that's not possible without Oppa around, because you are the reason why my life has become wonderful lately. Hunting Monsters, going out and having fun, but knowing that Oppa is waiting for me back home – also, that even if Oppa isn't home, you'd be back soon anyways... Without those, I won't be able to go on." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"....Really?" (Sae-Jin)

"That's right. So, stay by my side for the rest of our lives, okay? And stop saying those unlucky things, too." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Yu Sae-Jung spoke with a serious, determined face.

"Alright."

Sae-Jin nodded his head. Only then, she broke out into a warm smile and left a peck on his cheek. But that was only for a fleeting moment. Her eyes suddenly narrowed to a slit as she spoke.

"....Oh, and by the way. Yu-Rin Unni uploaded a photo to her SNS yesterday. You guys had sushi, huh?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

".....Ahaha, haha..."

"What's so funny?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

He awkwardly laughed. Then, he pressed her shoulders and pushed her down on the bed, stopping her interrogation efforts.

"Don't try to gloss over thi..... Eu-euph." (Yu Sae-Jung)

He didn't feel like sweating over small stuff right now.

He simply locked lips with her in a show of their love.

Sae-Jin proceeded to spend the night caressing the body of a

woman he found even more beautiful with every passing day.

< 47. Mah-in (3) > Fin.

Chapter 163: Waves (1)

(TL: Told from the MC's perspective.)

Good. Mor. Ning~~. Tingtingtingting, tingting...

"....Slurp, what the hell..." (Sae-Jin)

The smartphone alarm woke me up. I got slightly flustered – since it's not often I sleep until the alarm wakes me up. Grabbing the phone with my right hand, I found out it was seven in the morning.

And I even scheduled a final strategy meeting at six in the morning today... Fearing the absolute worst, I checked the messages – and as expected, a ton of dissatisfied texts bombs from the Guild members – including Kim Yu-Rin, Hazeline, etc, etc – had piled up in the inbox.

I was about to get up in a hurry, but then, looked at my left arm that felt like something a little bit weighty was resting on it. Turned out to be Sae-Jung.

Was it because we were really giving it our all last night? Or should that be this morning, instead? Whatever, she was still completely submerged in her dreamland, her breathing calm and steady like a sleeping child. With not a shred of fabric covering her, she remained still as if she had fainted or some such.

"Must be cold."

It would be fine to cover her with a blanket, but I embraced tightly instead. Her milky skin was so smooth and well, it felt really wonderful, too, almost to the point where I wanted to start 'tormenting' her for a bit longer.

"*Moan....*"

I pressed my cheek to hers and rubbed slowly, and only then, she squirmed this way and that, while showing signs of waking up. She

looked so adorable wriggling around like this, so I hugged her even tighter.

Vrrrr....

I wanted to stay like this for as long as I could, but too bad, the phone began vibrating.

This time, it was a call. From Kim Yu-Rin, no less.

Right, I don't have the time to laze around like this. After kissing Sae-Jung's forehead, I stood up. As I got dressed, Sae-Jung hugged the pillow tightly and rubbed it all over, as if she felt the emptiness next to her.

"Cute."

I gently patted her restless back.

And after helping her fall back into the comforting arms of sleep, I left the house.

(TL: Perspective changed back to 3rd person.)

As soon as Sae-Jin arrived at the underground conference room, he had to withstand several scary stares all at once. Well, they did gather here at six in the morning, regardless of how insanely busy each one of them were, but then, the very person who called for the meeting in the first place was late by a hour and a half, so there was that.

"I'm truly sorry." (Sae-Jin)

He lowered his head and apologised sincerely before sitting down on the seat of honour.

"Oh, well. What can you do? No need to apologise. We just have to wait for you. You're the person in charge, after all." (Hazeline) Those words came from the mouth of Hazeline, currently feeling prickly due to handling the daily running of the Wizard Tower.

"....Sorry." (Sae-Jin)

"I said, it's fine. Start the meeting already. You got delayed while romancing around, probably. I can tell without even looking." (Hazeline) "......"

Sae-Jin signaled Rhosrahdel with his eyes.

"Oh, uh, yes. I'll start with the regular briefing first." (Rhosrahdel) *

Below the pharmaceutical company's building, around two thousand Vampires affiliated with the el Las clan were concentrating on the deciphering & researching of a certain ancient tome, while the rest 28000 strutted around the outside world.

Taking that fact into account, it seemed like a bit of a stretch for ten people to face off against two thousand. Besides, even if they were able to fight them off, it would turn into a massacre during the process. That was a big no.

So, Sae-Jin devised a solution for this quandary.

And that was to teleport to the exact location where the clan's head was hiding at, and use the isolation barrier to isolate and deal only with the head and his retainers.

This was the best plan they could come up with at the end of the lengthy meeting.

"Well, in that case." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin began preparing equipment and spoke.

"Let's go and take them." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"....You mean, like right now?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

However, Yi Hye-Rin showed hesitation, her face flustered somewhat.

"Of course. Nothing good will come about by delaying this, after

all." (Kim Yu-Rin) "I haven't prepared myself yet..." (Yi Hye-Rin)

"And what other preparations do you need?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

With an expression showing she couldn't understand, Kim Yu-Rin looked around. There were uber-expensive artifacts, potions, equipment, weapons and other things strewn about inside the conference room. Even with a slight exaggeration, everything here would fetch over ten billion dollars if stolen and sold on the black market.

But well, all Yi Hye-Rin did in response was to blush deeply while fidgeting helplessly with her fingers. While everyone stared at her with questioning looks, Joo Ji-Hyuk slowly stood up from his seat.

"Pardon me, Miss Yu-Rin?" (Joo Ji-Hyuk)

"Yes?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

He called for her and whispered something to her ear. Only after that, she came to realise something important and became embarrassed, before letting off a couple of fake coughs and spoke up.

"I'm going to a convenience store for a little while. Hye-Rin-ah, would you like to come with me?" (Kim Yu-Rin) "Uh? Ah, yes. I will." (Yi Hye-Rin)

".....Oh." (Sae-Jin)

Only then, Sae-Jin figured it out. During the meeting, he detected a thick smell of blood so he thought that Rhosrahdel must've been stealthily snacking on a blood pack, but it was actually the result of the Great Mother Nature's magic.

Yi Hye-Rin whispered with a very small voice to Joo Ji-Hyuk, and vacated her seat.

"Thank you...." (Yi Hye-Rin)

Joo Ji-Hyuk didn't say anything, just a smooth smile etched on his lips.

And after eight hours of rest time caused by that small event.

"Is everyone ready to go?" (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin asked his companions. They were tightly holding onto the Leviathan's tail, limbs and other parts.

""""Yes."""

"Well, then. We're teleporting now. Oh, right. Please do not forget that our aim is to 'talk'. Fighting comes after if that fails." (Sae-Jin) Recalling the coordinates once more, Sae-Jin closed his eyes and imagined the scenery of the arrival point. Right then, a disgusting, unsettling sensation of space twisting apart washed over him.

The first thing he saw after opening his eyes, was a young boy.

A cute and innocent outer appearance, with his age that couldn't be more than ten years old or so. The boy showed no surprise at the sudden arrival of the enemies, and simply stared at them with darkly-hooded eyes.

The boy looked like a lost little kid, but Sae-Jin heard enough about the leader of the el Las to know the truth. Sae-Jin immediately deployed the barrier.

And the space they were in got separated from the rest of the world, dying in jet-black colour.

The interior of the barrier followed the will of the caster. As if Sae-Jin had inadvertently remembered Yi Hye-Rin's call of the Great Mother Nature, the interior of the barrier was transformed into a forest full of verdant trees and a small stream trickling by to the side.

Within this picturesque scenery, Sae-Jin stared at the boy and spoke.

"You're the leader of the el Las, correct?" (Sae-Jin)

"......I know about you."

The boy's words were quite literally out of the blue. That was why Sae-Jin couldn't easily form an appropriate answer.

"You're their son."

Sae-Jin's brows quivered.

"....What are you talking about now? Are you talking about me?" (Sae-Jin) "If it's not you, then who can be the child of them?"

"...For someone who knows about that stuff, aren't you a bit too young?" (Sae-Jin) "Yes, I am indeed too young. Anyone forty years old like me is considered a child in the el Las bloodline, after all. Since I was eight, my outer appearance has remained as you see."

Sae-Jin inexplicably recalled something Bathory mentioned in the past. She said that there were unique quirks found among different Vampire bloodlines.

"The eternal youth, is that it?" (Sae-Jin)

"Yes. But besides all that, aren't you curious about the true story regarding your father?"

Of course, he was curious. Sae-Jin didn't know what had happened in detail, so the curiosity drove him mad sometimes. But this wasn't the right time to dig into that stuff.

"We didn't come here to talk about stuff like that." (Sae-Jin) "Then, what topic did you wish to discuss so urgently that brings you here?"

Sae-Jin replied matter of factly.

"Mah-ins. And the Fissure." (Sae-Jin)

"Ah. So that's what you wanted to talk about."

The facial expression of the 'boy' was languid, while his brows lifted up ever so slightly.

"My apologies, but negotiations are not possible. We have no

intentions of letting go of the Fissure. Our one true aim always has been our homeworld."

"But, why? Even if you don't return to your homeworld, you should be able to live without too many issues just by waiting for a bit longer." (Sae-Jin) "Hmm.... Well, it is impossible for us to live with others. But if I was allowed to explain the reasoning, then your parents have to be brought into this discussion."

"What?" (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin's brows narrowed. The 'boy' didn't pay any mind and continued.

"It won't take long."

And so, the boy's story began. As he promised, it wasn't a lengthy tale.

Sae-Jin's father and mother, as the Knights of Eden, became involved in the so-called war with Vampires – operations to wipe out Vampires, in truth – and got deeply shaken to core by all the inhumane and senseless slaughtering they witnessed.

During one of the missions, they ran into him, the head of the el Las. And his pleading to their conscience resulted in him successfully duping them. It was all because of the 'great cause' of returning to the past version of their homeworld in order to change their fate, which certainly did not sound so bad on the surface.

So, the two of them aided el Las for a brief amount of time.

"However, when they came in contact with the Nosferatus, they betrayed us. I was really confused back then – the Nosferatus did not know our plans to widen the Fissure, after all.

"But somehow, they learned the truth. And they also gained this unshakeable belief in the process, as well. A belief so strong, your father even predicted that our plan will fail. That was why I killed him."

Sae-Jin glared deeply into the boy's eyes. Those unreadable eyes were eerily empty and completely devoid of feelings.

"But, after I killed him, I became deeply curious of just what the source of that great belief was. So, I furnished all the information regarding your father and left it in Eden. If the reason for that firm belief was a person, then perhaps, one day, wouldn't he show up to take a look? That's what my vague line of thought was."

A lightbulb went off inside Sae-Jin's head.

He felt like that the pieces were finally falling into their places now.

It would've not been difficult to destroy all the records since they had taken over Eden. Yet, the info about Sae-Jin's father was left as it was.

And the reason was...

"And then, he did come. Jin Seh-Hahn. I do not know what kind of connection this person had with your father, but regardless, he certainly possessed all the right qualities to become the foundation for that belief of him saving the world."

Sae-Jin's lips quivered slightly. Without a doubt, Jin Seh-Hahn's abilities and dignified appearance were enough to rouse such a misunderstanding – reaching the upper Mid Tier in less than six months, well, even Sae-Jin had to admit that it completely broke common sense.

"......" (Sae-Jin)

"Unfortunately, Jin Seh-Hahn was killed. We killed him. Do you all realise it now? There is no 'belief' for you anymore. There is no hope for you, either."

And so, this was the reason why this 'boy' told them of this short story of the past.

To let them know that el Las couldn't live with other races, and

that there was no hope left for humanity.

"...So, you believed that and caused all this chaos?" (Sae-Jin) "Yes."

"Ah, the thing is.... Kind of sorry about this, but..." (Sae-Jin) This time, it was Sae-Jin's turn to tell the truth.

"Jin Seh-Hahn didn't die, kid." (Hazeline)

Hazeline spoke up instead of Sae-Jin. Sae-Jin smirked and changed his appearance – into Jin Seh-Hahn's face, of course. The boy's face that was the very example of leisurely demeanor until now, finally crumpled to resemble an Asura. Even the rest of Sae-Jin's companions, who didn't know of the truth until now, got shocked out of their minds, too.

"You....!!"

"So, your expression finally changed, huh." (Sae-Jin)

Too bad, Sae-Jin and company didn't have the time to take things easy.

SFX for things shooting out

From behind the boy that now resembled an angry devil, an unidentifiable tentacle shot out. It divided into ten and rapidly grabbed hold of every Guild member present.

"It's called 'Mugu'. The Lord had gifted us this self-defense weapon. Regrettably, not even the Lord himself expected to be under fire before anyone else, though."

Sae-Jin transformed into the Leviathan Form. But no matter how hard he struggled, the grotesque tentacle remained tightly wound around him.

"That's not going to work. Because...."

Just as the 'boy' was about to extol the unbelievable sturdiness of the 'Mugu'...

The isolation barrier suddenly developed a crack, and at the same time, the Mugu got destroyed as well.

All of those events were caused by reddish Mana that weaved around the air like bloody mist.

".....How utterly disgusting." (Bathory)

A voice that was quite seductive and rather familiar at the same time.

The el Las leader fired dark coloured Mana Spears at the suddenly-appearing Bathory, but they simply melted into nothingness before even touching her skin.

"Fut. What the heck was that?" (Bathory)

She sniggered and with a simple flick of her finger, the entire body of the el Las leader got restrained to the spot.

"Kkeuh..."

"Better give up, kiddo," said Bathory.

The el Las 'boy' gritted his teeth.

"Again. Are you trying to kill your own species again?"

"Mm... There seems to be some sort of misunderstanding with what you're saying. Me, I decided not to see the clueless b*stards that get into bed with Mah-ins as the same species as me." (Bathory) Instincts mired in violence and wicked desires, below-average intelligence, and finally, powers that couldn't be controlled properly – the creature beyond saving thanks to this trio of sins, that was a Mah-in. And Mah-ins were considered enemies of all races in existence.

Enemies to Vampires, Elves, humans, Soo-ins, et al. From the very beginning, Mah-ins were treated similarly to that of Monsters.

"....Then, why did you murder our Lord?"

Suddenly, Bathory's expression crumpled.

"Did the Lord collude with the Mah-ins, too?"

As if he found Bathory's fury quite enjoyable, the head of the el Las clan continued on.

"Our Lord was only seeking the road to our salvation, that was all."

"Why don't you shut up now. Stop testing my patience, kid." (Bathory) "But you knew that better than anybody, didn't you? The Lord was your godfather, after all."

Finally, Bathory couldn't hold back anymore. The blood-red Mana coming out from her body crashed towards the 'boy' like a tsunami wave. However, he didn't try to avoid that onslaught of deadly Mana, and instead, accepted it with all his being.

And then, formed a smile.

At the same time, the floor of the research venue gave way and collapsed. Just below the falling floor, the abyss-like Fissure where nothing could be seen in its darkness, a crack in space that existed between worlds, waited for them.

"....You, you crazy son of a bi*ch!!" (Bathory)

In that instant, Bathory's eyes were dyed in panic after she figured out what the 'boy' was about to do.

"From here onwards, it's your turn. I shall be waiting for you in our homeworld, Miss Bathory."

The boy threw his body into the Fissure.

And the Fissure began to shake alarmingly, after swallowing el Las and Bathory's Mana swirling within his body.

< 48. Waves (1) > Fin.

Chapter 164: Waves (2)

(TL: Told from Bathory's perspective.)

The ground turned to dust and disappeared, and the sky above burned in fierce red as it split apart. Disgusting mucous substance replaced the missing ground, and something jet-black wriggled disgustingly within it. Covered in some sort of a film waiting to hatch, this something glared at me with bloodshot eyes.

I felt fear for the very first time in my life when I looked into those terrifying eyes. I also realised in that moment, that there was no way to fight against such a monstrosity.

I must run away if I want to live.

Leaving behind all my memories, my regrets, wishes – and run away to another world altogether.

But I believed no human alive would grant a Vampire like me passage through a portal that could admit only a finite number of travelers. After all, we've been the source of their biggest headache until now.

Whatever, I still headed to the portal while thinking that I will kill all those blocking my way.

However.... humans unexpectedly helped us.

The 'human' Wizards dispersed the incoming waves of attacks, and the 'human' Knights desperately blocked the unidentifiable creatures. In my eyes, though, they weren't resisting, simply throwing their lives away.

"What are you doing, Ellie!! Hurry and come over here!!" (TL: Not a mistranslation; mister Author changed Bathory's name, for good.) My godfather shouted at me, while I was lost in the sight of the humans fiercely fighting out there. I couldn't think for long. I entered the portal, and escaped from the homeworld.

And so, a brand new world I've never even dreamed of seeing in my life spread out before my stunned eyes.

"Are you refugees from another world?"

Another, 'new' humans were looking at me.

But... why didn't those humans run away in panic? Why did they lend a helping hand to us?

I never understood their reasoning back then, and even now, I can't understand it.

""

(TL: Back to 3rd person perspective.)

Captured by the memories of the past, Bathory's mind sunk deeper and deeper into the darkness below where nothing existed.

Suddenly, a baseless confidence rose up within her.

Her homeworld must've overcome the crisis of the Fissure.

And so, it must have recovered the beautiful scenery she and her companions used to see.

The homeworld was waiting with a warm and gentle embrace for her return.

Now completely entranced, she took a step closer towards the Fissure.

"What the hell are you doing?!" (Sae-Jin)

However, someone grabbed her arm. Her blurry, unfocused eyes regained focus. Bathory glanced at Kim Sae-Jin holding her arm, and then shifted her gaze back at the Fissure. Even now, the ground below her feet was collapsing. Although still incomplete, it resembled a portal now, more or less. If she swam in those dark waves, then she might arrive back at the homeworld she'd been longing for so much.

But in that moment, a solid arm tightly and rather forcefully

wrapped around her waist.

"Hey....!" (Bathory)

"Everyone, hold on!!" (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin shouted out while pulling Bathory into his arms. Confirming that everyone had clung tightly onto him, he quickly transformed into the Leviathan and activated the instant transmission.

*

As if the sight of that Fissure stretching below their feet infinitely was nothing more than a nightmare, the team members returned to the underground conference room in an instant.

But no one spoke a single word; they were suffering from the shock of the events that happened just now.

And what the hell was that thing they saw?

It was as if the entire surface of the earth became a Fissure. No one had seen one that big before, ever.

"What happened back there?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin broke the heavy silence with some difficulty. She was a brave person indeed to speak up, since the person she asked and was expecting an answer from happened to be Bathory.

With complicated eyes, the Vampire queen stared at Kim Yu-Rin, before breaking out in a smirk.

"What else? That dang kid stimulated the Fissure by using my Mana, his own body, as well as the Feather of Efrit, that's what." (Bathory) "What's a Feather of Efrit?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"You know, that thing. The thing that almost killed you just now. Looking like an octopus, with tentacles and stuff." (Bathory) "Ah."

Kim Yu-Rin stupidly nodded her head. Bathory shook her head as

if she disapproved of the reaction, and then continued.

"That thing, is a remnant of the 'demon god' that used to live back in my homeworld. It will never disappear, unless you kill the original body it came from, and its destructive power depends on the 'grade' of Mana absorbed." (Bathory) Bathory stopped talking for a moment, and let out a frustrated sigh.

"....But, that d**n feather absorbed my Mana. So, it and the body of that d**n el Las kid will be consumed as the fuel to widen up the Fissure for good. Even if things get delayed, in two days' time, everything will come to an end."

In other words, this was the worst of all possibilities. Kim Yu-Rin gritted her teeth.

"Then, what should we do now?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Well, you should decide. To abandon your home, and escape to another world. Or, fall together with this planet." (Bathory) When Bathory's words ended, Kim Yu-Rin stumbled and sat down on the couch, as if some of her strength escaped.

It was then. Sae-Jin, who had been quietly listening while his gaze was fixed to the floor, raised his head.

"....There's something I'm curious about." (Sae-Jin)

Bathory glanced at Sae-Jin's direction.

"Does that Feather function as something important?" (Sae-Jin) "....Hey, you. It's from a demonic god. A d**n demon god. It's got the word 'god' in it, for crying out loud. How can you be even worse than me in language and stuff?" (Bathory) "Whatever. So you're saying it plays a crucial role, right? Then, we still might have more time than you think." (Sae-Jin) "......You really are a hopelessly unsalvageable idiot, aren't you?" (Bathory) Even under the assault of Bathory's sneering eyes, Sae-Jin simply chuckled and produced an item tucked away within himself.

It was an item procured on the spur of the moment, a jet-black

and surprisingly hard feather - the Feather of Efrit.

Seeing this, Bathory's eyes widened.

"But.... How?" (Bathory)

"Looks like it is the correct article, then, judging by your reaction. I knew instinctively that this thing was a weakness. So, I took it." (Sae-Jin) ".....Oh well. Sure, you did something good, but it's all too late now. What you did was to delay something that was planned to happen tomorrow, for maybe two months, tops." (Bathory) What she said was correct; no matter how positive they wanted to spin this, this one fact couldn't be denied, causing yet another weighty bout of silence to descend in the room.

And so.... time continued to flow and soon, the day became night.

Sae-Jin didn't have anything to do. Didn't feel like holding another meeting, either. But, he didn't dare to go home, not just yet.

He was trying to solve the problem, but ended up exacerbating the situation even further. Was it because he was too hasty...?

As if this thought was shared among the rest of the team members, not one of them thought about leaving the conference room.

However, Bathory had disappeared a long time ago. And Sae-Jin could only feel his chest tighten further in frustration.

He lied down on the couch and closed his eyes.

He didn't mind at all if this whole situation turned out to be some sort of a bad dream. Not at all.

*

"....Uhm, Guild Master?"

Someone's voice spread out like a ripple in Sae-Jin's consciousness.

"I have something to tell you." (Lillia)

When he opened his eyes a little, he saw Lillia. Like a mirage borne out of his fading dream, she seemed especially beautiful under the cover of darkness.

"Regarding....?" (Sae-Jin)

"For now, please come with me." (Lillia)

Sae-Jin rubbed his eyes a bit and looked around.

"I'm sure it's fine, since everyone's still asleep..." (Sae-Jin) While grumbling to himself, Sae-Jin moved towards the barrier room Hazeline used to practice, located next to the conference room. After going as far as to activate the isolation barrier, Sae-Jin yawned out loudly and stared at Lillia.

"What did you want to tell me?" (Sae-Jin)

Lillia smiled thinly.

For some reason, Sae-Jin thought that smile was incredibly gentle and warm.

"Looks like we don't have much time left, yes? Soon, the Fissure will open up in full." (Lillia) "Ah, that...."

And here he was, almost forgetting it. Sae-Jin could only let out a bitter groan rising from deep within his heart.

"Wait. How did you find out?" (Sae-Jin)

He could not remember telling Lillia about what had happened.

She maintained that gentle smile and spoke some cryptic, enigmatic words to him.

"It's going to be fine. All of us. And the planet." (Lillia) ".....Pardon?" (Sae-Jin)

Lillia was full of confidence. Obviously, Sae-Jin couldn't understand.

Regardless, she relaxedly continued on with that smooth, gentle

voice of hers.

"A Fissure will try to destroy a 'world' by inserting a gap of sorts in there. But surprisingly... because of that very gap, something that could definitely never occur without the existence of a Fissure, something with a hopelessly low percentage of succeeding, a miracle so miraculous – that very miracle is going to happen." (Lillia) From her inner pocket, she pulled out a worn-out notebook that seemed to have bore witness to the cruel and unrelenting passage of time. Then, she pushed it at Sae-Jin.

"Please, read this." (Lillia)

Sae-Jin received the notebook with a confused face.

"It might break if I try to open it..." (Sae-Jin)

"It's been treated with magic." (Lillia)

"Oh, is that so?However, this thing... it seems awfully familiar." (Sae-Jin) Something about this book seemed really familiar to him. Sae-Jin tilted his head while flipping over to the first page. And almost right away, he understood the reason why.

The dates jotted down, the sparse details of the daily happenings, and the feelings noted within...

This was a certain someone's diary.

"This... is..." (Sae-Jin)

The revelation was shocking. It felt like he got struck in the back of his head by the Emillejong Bell, and now the insides were ringing like crazy. In that moment, he couldn't even breathe, let alone string a sentence together. (TL: Apparently, the largest bell in the Korean peninsula. Google it if you're curious.) Lillia smiled again while looking at him.

And as if she was trying to imprint every single word in his head, she spoke carefully.

"This notebook, it's your diary. To be more specific, it's a diary

written by the future version of you.... Something like that." (Lillia) "......Huh."

A wry, bitter chuckle escaped his mouth.

One could traverse through time by entering the Fissure.

He knew this already, but he honestly did not expect things to turn out quite like this.

"Please, read everything in it." (Lillia)

"For, for now, let's.... Let's go somewhere else." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin did his best to rein his quaking mind and hid the diary within his inner pocket.

*

Sae-Jin went to a nearby hotel and after getting a room, began reading the diary. He spent the whole day reading it. There were things he was embarrassed to share with others; there were many missing dates too, as if he was too busy to write something down; and the most important part, the part about what happened after the Fissure completely broke open, was somewhat hazy and vague in detail.

"This book of prophecy, no, this diary has been our most sacred holy book, even now. Without this, we'd still be dreaming the false dream of returning to our homeworld." (Lillia) "Okay, fine, but.... Just when did, uh, 'me'.... give you this?" (Sae-Jin) "Probably, around 70 years ago. Maybe." (Lillia)

"You look considerably young for that, though?" (Sae-Jin)

"It's only my external appearance that looks young." (Lillia) "Ha, haha..." (Sae-Jin)

But more importantly, 70 years – that was a long time ago. No, perhaps, it could have been even longer than that. Sae-Jin began smiling bitterly at the thought.

Lillia tightly held his hand. And with a somewhat unsure face,

she spoke words that seemed a bit out of the blue.

"The earth, and us, we were fated to be saved. By Mister Sae-Jin's hands." (Lillia) Her voice contained a heavy dosage of determined reverence.

"....I'm not planning to run away from this, so you don't have to console me. It seems like it's already set in stone, anyways. If I can save myself, the planet, all those precious to me, then it's for the better, I guess.... But, it sure doesn't feel so good if I think about what's to come, you know?" (Sae-Jin) Sae-Jin forcibly squeezed out a smile and asked a question he was really curious about.

"But, just what did this diary have to do with the Vampire Lord?" (Sae-Jin) That thing the Lord said, the prophecy that still remained fleeting in his head – just how did this book relate to those words?

"This original book was kept within me via Spiritualisation, while I had a copy made to resemble an 'ancient tome', and had it stored in an underground vault. The Lord took away that copy and researched it." (Lillia) "....Wait a minute. Are you saying the Vampires have been researching my diary?!" (Sae-Jin) "Fuhut. No. No, they weren't doing that. The only one researching your diary was the Lord, no one else. The other Vampires were researching the real ancient tome we brought along from our homeworld." (Lillia) "Aha.... I was way off the mark, wasn't I." (Sae-Jin)

"Yes, somewhat." (Lillia)

The conversation tinged with slight humour only lasted for an all-too brief second, before a strange silence filled the gap.

SFX for ticking of a clock

The ticking of the second hand felt so sharp in this moment.

After looking down on the diary for a while, Sae-Jin grumbled in a voice that sounded a little dejected.

"By the way, if things unfold as this diary says, then... it might get a bit depressing. Ah, maybe the boredom should be a bigger worry than depression, instead." (Sae-Jin) "....Whatever happens, you'll have to forfeit a lot of things." (Lillia) Lillia gazed at him with those pair of gentle eyes. Sae-Jin met her gaze.

"Perhaps, do you seek company? I'm always ready...." (Lillia)

It seemed that she mistook his gaze for something else entirely, judging by the way she began to undo the buttons of her dress...

"There's no need. Please leave. I'd like to be alone for now." (Sae-Jin) "Eh? But, in your diary, we... Ah, that was a prank?!" (Lillia) "....Fut. For now, let me be alone. Please." (Sae-Jin)

Thanks to her, he did feel a little bit better.

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When the dawn's sun rose, Sae-Jin left the hotel. He wandered the streets aimlessly, while holding the Feather of Efrit in one hand. The demon god's inheritance – the things that needed to be done with it were quite clear to him.

In that case, was there a reason for him to tremble in fear and hesitate?

Sae-Jin shook away all unnecessary thoughts and then, chucked the Feather into his mouth.

As it was written on the 'diary', many, many alert windows popped up.

However, he didn't feel the usual joy of evolution. He also didn't feel depressed, either. He didn't even feel the burning sense of duty, too. No, rather unexcitingly, he just felt that this was something he simply had to do.

[Condition complete: The Wolf that kills gods, Fenrir.]

- The dormant potential sleeping within explodes forth, after ingesting the Feather of Efrit.
- However, as the quantity isn't enough, the host can only transform into Fenrir for 'one day'.

What the hell is a bloody Fenrir now?!

A groan automatically escaped from his mouth.

< 48. Waves (2) > fin.

Chapter 165: Waves (3)

Sae-Jin returned to the conference room and told the gathered members to go home. He told them that he and Lillia had come up with a suitable plan of action, so they shouldn't worry too much.

Then, he sat alone in the empty conference room and switched on the TV.

The footage of everyday life shown on screen was the same as before.

Channels dedicated to all things magic busy talked about the matters related to the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong, who had published a brand new grimoire not too long ago; entertainment programmes, being aired much too early in the day it seemed, were filled with a sense of responsibility, an obligation to entertain the masses during these turbulent times; while the news channels must've decided to run counter to the entertainment channels, by only talking about serious topics over and over again.

As expected, the everyday lives remained the same.

Sae-Jin spent a bit of time looking at the TV screen with a dazed face, before leaving the room himself.

Greeted by the employees of the Guild, Sae-Jin escaped the HQ building, and drove home in his car. Although the time was just about when folks were commuting to work, the roads were sparsely populated thanks to the frequently-occurring Monster attacks. So, he got to drive at a more than acceptable speed. He even rolled his window down.

SFX for wind rushing in

Cool breeze entered the cabin.

Through the open window of the car, he could see the morning sun peeking out from under the clouds. Under that clear, bright rays of the rising sun, the river below shimmered like the polished surface of a priceless jewel.

He felt like concentrating on the scenery, so he put the car on autopilot.

The stunning, beautiful views passed by him, and the people started their daily lives.

Humans, Elves, Soo-ins, they were all starting their day.

Sae-Jin carefully studied each and every one of their faces as long as he could.

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Sae-Jin came home, and found Yu Sae-Jung still deeply asleep. While carrying a thin smile, he lightly kissed her cheek. She opened her sleepy eyes and smiled brightly, before hugging him tight.

"You got an off day today?" (Sae-Jin)

"Ng~~. I was in a raid yesterday, so I got the day off today." (Yu Sae-Jung) "A raid? It must've been not too long ago since you came home." (Sae-Jin) "Yeah, maybe a hour ago? But, it's okay." (Yu Sae-Jung) It turned out, she wasn't 'still' sleeping. As he was feeling apologetic, she suddenly pulled his head close and kissed him deeply in the mouth.

She seemed especially hands-on today.

There was no need for a deep discussion, then. While smiling, Sae-Jin began to slowly undress her.

And so, the two of them started their precious day together.

".....You what?!" (Bathory)

A day after that happened.

Bathory got surprised by Sae-Jin's unexpected visit to her place, but then, got even more dumbfounded by what he had said to her.

"Have you gone insane?" (Bathory)

"Well, it doesn't matter to you anyways, right? It's not like you'll run out of blood, after all. Instead, I'll supply you with the highest quality blood packs as compensation. Blood from Knights, no less." (Sae-Jin) Sae-Jin maintained a crafty smile even while under Bathory's disgusted stare. What he asked her for was her blood.

"Do you even realise what blood means to us Vampires?" (Bathory) "It's important, I know that." (Sae-Jin)

"It's past the level of being important, since it's used to demarcate our classes, you see? But now, you asking a Vampire for her blood, doesn't that mean you're planning to commit suicide by my hands?" (Bathory) Bathory's forehead creased up rather deeply.

"Well, it can't be helped, then. I'll just take it by force." (Sae-Jin) Sae-Jin growled deliberately and stared fiercely at her. However, her expressions became even more angrier, instead.

"Crazy b*stard..." (Bathory)

"Argh, just help me out here, will you. Like the boss lady you are." (Sae-Jin) "Just where are you planning to use my.... No wait, besides that, why should I even help you out here?" (Bathory) "Because you already helped us out?" (Sae-Jin)

"You hurt your head real bad, didn't you?" (Bathory)

Sae-Jin chuckled and pulled out his phone.

"In return, let me give you a small present." (Sae-Jin) He then projected one of the stored footages as a hologram.

SFX for a chick chirping

It was a recording of a Korean crow-tit chick flying around in the air. Seeing that cute outer exterior, Bathory froze up.

"Isn't it cute? It looks cute enough, but it's unexpectedly strong, though." (Sae-Jin) "....S, so, what about it?" (Bathory)

"I'll let you take it as your new pet. It's got a bit of a rotten

personality, but I'm sure you'll tame it just fine." (Sae-Jin) It seemed Bathory got interested, but she quickly regained her senses and shook head fiercely.

"Why should I..." (Bathory)

But Sae-Jin wasn't finished with his sales pitch.

"I hear that thing was created by the Vampire Lord." (Sae-Jin) He heard it from the Nosferatus that this bird was actually a Chimera carefully created by the Lord himself. Which sounded about right, since common sense dictated that a Monster wouldn't look that cute no matter what.

And his reason for creating that thing was to give it to Bathory as a present at some stage. It seemed that the Lord was aware of Bathory's slightly strange taste in hobbies.

Sae-Jin chose not to pass on those emotive truths to her, however.

" "

As if she had figured that out without him saying anything else, Bathory didn't utter a single word. Judging by how her chin protruded out and trembled at the same time, she seemed to be fighting hard against the tide of emotions right now.

She finally opened her mouth after a lengthy bout of silence. Her voice was weak and shaky.

"....But, but, isn't that mine already? I mean.... I'm the Lord now..." (Bathory) Sae-Jin averted his gaze in order to pretend that he didn't see the hints of tears on her facade of steady strength.

"Technically, sure. But that dang thing is really fast, so even you'll have trouble catching it. Most likely, you will end up wasting time flying around this way and that." (Sae-Jin) "What the? So, how the heck will you catch something that even I can't?" (Bathory) Kim Sae-Jin smirked confidently.

"There is a way." (Sae-Jin)

Bathory glared at him wordlessly. Sae-Jin nervously swallowed, feeling the tension. The suffocating time crept by. He already knew she'd say yes, yet the tension was really mounting up.

Suddenly, Bathory lowered the shoulder lace of her red dress. Her pale smooth skin got exposed to his eyes quite unexpectedly, so Sae-Jin blushed a little bit and averted his gaze once more.

"Hey, hey, hey. It's too sudden, you know..." (Sae-Jin)

"Why don't you just shut up. How much do you need?" (Bathory)

There wasn't too much time left. That was why he couldn't afford to waste one single day.

So, the day after he got Bathory's permission, Sae-Jin called for a regular Guild Members Conference to be held. Scheduled for the 17th every month, its purpose was to let the Guild members gather together and foster friendship and camaraderie.

The very first person he ran into was Kim Yu-Rin, known for her strict policy of arriving before the promised time. As a matter of fact, she arrived almost one hour early – but her complexion wasn't so good.

More than likely, many worries and fears were tumbling around within her mind.

He took her to a five-star restaurant that even the self-proclaimed epicurean like himself found utterly beyond reproach.

Less than ten minutes ago, she protested that she had no appetite whatsoever, but as soon as a juicy slab of steak was placed in front, she began chugging it down her throat. Sae-Jin found it quite humorous, seeing her looking depressed while busy shoving the delectable meat into her mouth.

"Is it good?" (Sae-Jin)

"Yes...." (Kim Yu-Rin)

While he studied her interestedly, another member arrived. This time, it was Hazeline. Her complexion was just as poor, but when she discovered both Sae-Jin and Kim Yu-Rin, some colour did return.

Hazeline hesitated by the end of the table, wondering whether to sit next to Sae-Jin, or next to Kim Yu-Rin.

But then, Yu Baek-Song entered the venue, let off a short exclamation, and dived into the open seat right next to Sae-Jin's. Hazeline had also chosen the seat next to Sae-Jin with great difficulty by then, so she got flustered by this sudden intrusion and hurriedly grabbed the back of Yu Baek-Song's neck.

"Hey, you!! Get out of there!!" (Hazeline)

"Where the hell do you think you are grabbing right now?!" (Yu Baek-Song) Too bad, there was no way Hazeline could win in the physical battle, so the situation got reversed in a heartbeat.

"Let, let go!! Let me go when I'm still being nice!!" (Hazeline) Hazeline cried out in alarm. Well, she was locked into a painful-looking headlock, after all.

"Why doncha try being not nice, then?" (Yu Baek-Song)

"Ah, arh, ahh!! That hurts!!" (Hazeline)

Sae-Jin looked at them and chuckled ever so slightly.

"Hahaha... The seat next to me is reserved for someone else, though." (Sae-Jin) "Huh?"

"Today's a gathering of all the Guild members, remember? Sae-Jung should be arriving very soon." (Sae-Jin) Only then, Yu Baek-Song released the headlock and changed her seat to the one near the empty seat next to Sae-Jin's.

"Others haven't arrived yet? New Guild members will attend this thing, right?" (Yu Baek-Song) "They should be arriving soon as

well. Ah, here they come." (Sae-Jin) Kim Sun-Ho arrived, along with Rhosrahdel in tow.

Not long after that, two new male members Joo Oh-Hyung and Bretin entered the venue, completely stiff from the nervousness.

""It's a pleasure to make your acquaintances!!""

After the duo's energetic greetings came to an end, Joo Ji-Hyuk and Yi Hye-Rin showed up together next.

With their arms entwined in the open for all to see, it seemed that their relationship had moved onto a more favourable stage. Was this the case of 'danger' being the best matchmaker there ever was?

"We're here now, everyone~." (Yi Hye-Rin)

"....H, hmm." (Joo Ji-Hyuk)

Yi Hye-Rin, pretending to be outgoing and bright, and Joo Ji-Hyuk, fake coughing to clear his throat while his expressions looking somewhat complicated – the two of them sat down next to each other.

Yu Sae-Jung entered the restaurant soon afterwards.

"I got delayed while parking the car~. Really now, Knight Joo Ji-Hyuk, how come you don't have the driving licence yet? Also, Miss Hye-Rin, too?" (Yu Sae-Jung) "Haha.... I, uh, I only have a licence for riding Griffins." (Joo Ji-Hyuk) Joo Ji-Hyuk came up with an excuse while scratching the back of his head. Yu Sae-Jung smiled brightly and sat down next to Sae-Jin.

"Oppa~." (Yu Baek-Song)

And then, openly hugged him tightly for everyone to see.

Kim Yu-Rin took a glance at Hazeline's direction. Hazeline too glanced at Kim Yu-Rin. Their gazes met each other's in the middle. Hazeline's body shuddered involuntarily, before she formed a smile that said she's okay, and then, leaned her head against Kim

Yu-Rin's shoulder.

"...So, is this everyone?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin asked while slowly pushing Hazeline's head off her shoulder.

"No, not yet. There is one more person still to come." (Sae-Jin) "One more?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin looked around the table. However, no matter how much she looked, everyone seemed to be here.

Then, she remembered one more face. But, that woman was....

"Can't be." (Kim Yu-Rin)

With an excellent timing, the sharp sounds of high heels could be heard.

The front entrance to the restaurant opened in a rather eerie manner, and the unlikely protagonist for today's get-together had finally showed herself.

Ellie von Bathory.

The queen of the Vampires.

"Uh-hurk!"

At her sudden intrusion, everyone panicked, with the only exception being Yu Sae-Jung and her tilting head, who had no clue on Bathory's true identity.

Meanwhile, Bathory walked up to the table in no time and took a seat right next to Yu Baek-Song. Seeing Yu Baek-Song stiffen up completely, it was as if she was no longer a divine White Tiger, but a mere domesticated white cat, instead.

".....And why are you all staring at me for? I'm also a Guild member, too. Are you dissatisfied by that?" (Bathory) Bathory pointedly asked Joo Ji-Hyuk, who had been sitting in his seat with an unhappy expression while staring at the leader of the Vampires.

As soon as he got asked, he violently shook his head and averted his gaze towards the table.

"Well, then. Everyone, let's not be so stiff here. We gathered today in order to foster friendship and understanding among the members, so let us enjoy ourselves." (Sae-Jin) Sae-Jin clapped his hands in order to liven up the atmosphere. At the same time, countless waiters appeared and carried many delicacies and drinks to the table. All of them were luxurious, top-of-the-line stuff that truly showcased the meaning of having a 'feast'.

But, well, Bathory didn't really care for how wonderful the feast laid out before her eyes was.

Of course, that was only until a plate topped off with a pair of energy bars was placed in front of her.

"What the. Hey, you wish to kill yourself today?" (Bathory) Bathory narrowed her eyes and glared at the waiter that brought this plate. However, as if he had received the prior 'education', this waiter rapidly evacuated from the spot.

"Hey! Bring me that b*stard over here!" (Bathory)

As if she got a bit ticked off, Bathory cracked her neck muscles and beckoned with her finger. Sae-Jin quickly pacified her.

"Don't be like that, and have a bite." (Sae-Jin)

"And why should I bite c**p like this?!" (Bathory)

Instead of calming down, though, she shouted out in an even louder voice, which served to freeze the atmosphere of the meeting completely.

"Hmm..."

Sae-Jin wordlessly tapped the table.

"Take a bite first and see. It's wine flavoured, so I think you might be less resistant to it." (Sae-Jin) Bathory shuddered a bit when she heard him.

Wine. The alcoholic drink that humans drank regularly, but something she could never enjoy. Back in her homeworld, drinking good wine was a popular pastime. Even back then, her young mind often wondered how good it could be, since a bottle of certain wine could buy a whole village. Just how tasty could it be?

"

Bathory surveyed her surroundings. Guild members who were silently staring at her hurriedly dug into their food as soon as her gazes swept past them. Heck, they even forcibly commenced with conversations among themselves. They still stole quick glances at her, though, as if to signal their mounting curiosity to find out whether she'd take a bite off the energy bar or not.

And so, another ten minutes went by.

Making sure no one was looking at her, Bathory stealthily picked up one of the bars, and peeled it using Mana to erase all sounds. And then, she glanced around one more time to make sure no one was looking.

And indeed, no one had noticed.

Now was the time!!

She swallowed the energy bar whole.

And at that moment, her eyes shot right open.

The faint aroma of grapes that seemed to arrest every pore of her body caused her face to blush, and her spine spasmed violently.

It completely, utterly suited her preference.

"Uh-heuph...."

She quickly blocked her mouth from uttering out the gasps of pleasure. Thank heavens, no one noticed her small incident even now.

....With a clear exception of one b*stard, that was.

"Heheh."

Bathory felt like pouring all her strength into wiping that oily smirk off Sae-Jin's grinning face. Even if it was for just once.

< 48. Waves (3) > Fin.

Chapter 166: The Wait (1)

Fallen leaves and naked trees; warmer coats and cooler temperatures. In a few areas of Gangwon Province, where the changes in seasons were especially prominent, thin snowflakes were falling here and there – it was that kind of a day.

The middle of November existed in limbo, stuck between the end of Autumn and the beginning of Winter.

Not wanting to waste precious time, Sae-Jin focused every fibre of his being on various business ventures under his control.

Firstly, his company constructed an artificial island the size of Yeouido off the Gangwon's coastline for the East Sea, and the nesting area for Griffins was built there. He also spent half of each day on crafting various artifacts and armaments as well as writing grimoires. Of course, that meant he didn't get to enjoy the luxury of sleep at all during this time. (TL: Yeouido might sound like a fakey tongue-twister, but it's an actual island in the middle of Han River flowing through Seoul. Think of it as Manhattan and you're almost there.)

He also actively participated on the matters of foreign affair as well.

He met and held talks with local and overseas politicians, Presidents, and Prime Ministers. And he assured them that the humanity would definitely overcome the current crisis, so they must never give up hope and endure for a little bit longer.

Some people accused him of preaching baseless hope to the masses, but Sae-Jin ignored them and did not stop his work.

Cooperating with the government, he was able to restrict access to the home base of the el Las clan where the Fissure had opened up.

The estimated size of the Fissure was around 1000 pyoung.

Considering that the Fissure in Africa that caused the history's biggest catastrophe was only around 20 pyoung, the new one's size was enough to instill an unprecedented amount of despair on all who saw it.

The survey team comprised of The Monster's staff and government employees fell into a deep state of panic, once they clapped their eyes on the actual Fissure. If it wasn't for Rhosrahdel's mind control magic 'decreasing' the size of the Fissure to 1/100 in the survey team's minds, then the whole world might have fallen into an even greater chaos right then.

And before long, as he spent every single day busy as a bee, the 'deadline' drew in ever closer, now only one month away.

"There it is." (Sae-Jin)

And today.

Just as it was written on his diary, Sae-Jin came to a coastline near Yeongdo located in Busan. And in between the distant white, fluffy clouds, he could see the blurry shape of that Korean crow-tit chick. (TL: It's an island off the south coast of the city of Busan.)

Bathory followed Sae-Jin's pointing fingers and took a very long look at the bird-like Monster. She was more than satisfied by the adorable exterior of the creature.

"....It's bigger than I expected." (Bathory)

"What, you don't like it?" (Sae-Jin)

"Nope." (Bathory)

After spitting out a short reply, Bathory extended out her Mana towards the Monster. Sae-Jin expected the creature to fiercely rebel against them, but to his surprise, it chased after the Mana's trail and descended. Heck, it even nasally chirped ppiyack, ppiyack, too.

Sae-Jin broke out in a hollow chuckle - did the dang thing

recognise its destined master or something?

When the bird Monster got close enough, Bathory reached out her hand. The creature was busy smiling as it approached, but then, spotted Sae-Jin next to her and became very cautious for a minute. Eventually, though, it crept up closer and settled quietly down on Bathory's arm – like some dang pirate's parrot or something.

"Would you look at that." (Sae-Jin)

Finally, Sae-Jin got to take a detailed look at the bird Monster.

A small protruding beak, the wide and flat-ish face, and a pair of round and clear eyes that nicely shone in contrast to that face. But what caught his attention the most were faint letters visible on where the wing met the shoulder. It was neither English nor Korean.

But Sae-Jin could more or less tell the meaning of those letters.

"That's my name. Ellie von Bathory."

As if she had realised the true meaning of it, Bathory murmured with a complicated emotion. Her voice contained a faint trace of sadness. Sae-Jin didn't have anything particularly important to say, so he said whatever.

"It's a pretty name." (Sae-Jin)

"....Shut up." (Bathory)

It seemed that he shouldn't have said anything. When Bathory took a glance at him....

"Ppeheck!!"

The bird Monster, that had been busy rubbing its body on Bathory's arm until now, suddenly spat out a Breath of flames at Sae-Jin's face.

It was as if it would not tolerate a human being annoying its master. Sae-Jin's blackened face crumpled unsightly.

"Fuhut, well done, my Choucream." (TL: This is a Konglish word describing a certain type of custard. Google it if you're curious. 슈크림)

She had named it already. Sae-Jin grinned thinly and extended his hand towards the Monster.

"Hand it over. Let me hit it just once." (Sae-Jin)

"Get lost." (Bathory)

Bathory mockingly laughed as if he got what he deserved, and then, used instant transmission along with the bird Monster. Suddenly left all alone, Sae-Jin wiped the ashes off his face and searched after her Mana signature.

Well, there was a little bit of blood he needed to receive from her still.

December first.

""

""

""

Kim Yu-Rin, Sae-Jin, Hazeline, Yu Sae-Jung, and Yu Baek-Song were staring at the rectangular card resting on top of the conference table and were thinking very deeply.

Just what was this card supposed to be...?

"It's my wedding invitation~." (Yi Hye-Rin)

Yi Hye-Rin solved all their questions with a cheerful voice.

The five people's heads shot right up.

"So suddenly?"

"....We don't know what's going to happen in the future, so I should get married before something does happen, right?" (Yi Hye-

Rin)

Unlike her smiling face, her words spoke of a rather depressing future possibility.

"Does Mister Ji-Hyuk... know he's getting married to you?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Sae-Jin couldn't help but chuckle at Kim Yu-Rin's cautious inquiry. If the husband-to-be wasn't aware of the wedding, then that would be a wonderful comedy in itself.

Yi Hye-Rin frowned slightly and nodded her head.

"Of course. If we count us flirting around as us dating, then we've been going out for over a year already." (Yi Hye-Rin)

Indeed, they did flirt pretty hardcore until now.

"Well, yeah. Mister Joo Ji-Hyuk is a good man, so I am not too concerned, but..." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin became suspicious ever so slightly. Seeing that a wedding had been set way before the participants were 'known' to be in love, she couldn't help but wonder if there was some kind of an accident at play here.

As if she was unable to see why suspicions might rise – or, simply not caring – Yi Hye-Rin grinned refreshingly and surveyed the faces of everyone, before playfully yammering on.

"Oh yeah, by the way – Captain, just when did you sneak to our Guild Master's side? Even the first 'madam' is present here and all, so like, wowsers." (Yi Hye-Rin)

"Ah, now that you mention it, you're right. Let's swap places." (Yu Sae-Jung)

At the same time, the deeply troubled Yu Sae-Jung shot up from her seat.

"Ahaha.... Sorry, sorry." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Kim Yu-Rin scratched the back of her neck and vacated the seat, and Yu Sae-Jung rapidly occupied the resulting empty spot.

"For the role of the marriage officiant, the Raven Order Master has agreed to fill in, and I also got the word that Guild Master will sing the congratulatory song." (Yi Hye-Rin)

"....Hang on. I'm singing at your wedding reception?" (Sae-Jin)

"Yep." (Yi Hye-Rin)

"But, I can't sing, though? No, wait. You've never even asked me about this until now, so... how?" (Sae-Jin)

He couldn't remember ever agreeing to sing – not even in his dreams did he agree to do such a thing. When Sae-Jin became flustered, Yi Hye-Rin also became somewhat confused as well.

"But, I got the permission from Sae-Jung? Back when we went out for a night out, just couple of us Knights." (Yi Hye-Rin)

Sae-Jin glared at Yu Sae-Jung with eyes demanding explanations. She evaded his pointed stares and whispered in a low, low voice.

"I forgot to mention it to you..." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"E, eh?! But, but! You're already so famous for your dreamy voice, Guild Master! That's why I definitely believe you'll sing beautifully, really!! And I even boasted to others you'd be singing at the ceremony..." (Yi Hye-Rin)

Sae-Jin couldn't bring himself to say no to Yi Hye-Rin's desperately pleading eyes. Still, he needed to punish Yu Sae-Jung appropriately.

"Okay, I understand. I will do it. But.... Miss Yu-Rin, I think you should change your seat again." (Sae-Jin)

"Ah!! No, you can't! I'm sorry, Oppa!" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Change the seat." (Sae-Jin)

".....Euh euh." (Yu Sae-Jung)

And so, Yu Sae-Jung was unceremoniously demoted. But, not too long afterwards, even Kim Yu-Rin lost her spot to Hazeline after she was found to be lusting after... Sae-Jin's portion of snacks.

Yi Hye-Rin couldn't help but laugh out loudly while watching these four people.

"SFX for a loud guffaw"

It would be wonderful if she could spend the rest of her life this happy.

Yi Hye-Rin thought of this small but luxurious dream.

*

[The Monster Guild member and a top celeb, Yi Hye-Rin announces shock wedding ceremony. The husband to be is...]

Soon afterwards, news broke out simultaneously all over the media. As expected, Yi Hye-Rin's popularity and the reach of her influence were great enough for her story to dominate not only the entertainment sections, but even the society pages as well.

And on the following day the news broke, the wedding ceremony took place.

The venue was the front lawn of the Guild HQ building. (TL: Very romantic.... Nope, not really.)

Nominally, it was a 'small-scale', closed-door wedding ceremony, but the identities of those attending it were enough to cause gasps of shock – from the likes of the Raven Order Master, to the country's Prime Minister, who should be too busy with work to attend a wedding, and even CEO of TM, Jo Hahn-Sung, etc, etc...

And in this place where real heavyweights had gathered, Sae-Jin had to sing in public. The name of the chosen song was "You In My Arms". It was rather funny seeing his reddened face while he sang, but thanks to his rather suave voice, the venue soon got into the groove of the song. The whole atmosphere in here was quite

romantic and hopeful. (TL: There is a K-pop song with the same name, sung by Yoo Jae-Ha. I think it's the song the author is talking about. Youtube it if you're curious... Because, I'm not.)

The wedding eventually ended in a gentle, tranquil mood.

"And we're going now~."

After saying their farewells to the gathered Guild members and the family from both sides, Joo Ji-Hyuk and Yi Hye-Rin went off to their honeymoon.

Actually, although it was nominally a honeymoon, it was nothing more than the married couple taking three days off and resting at Yi Hye-Rin's personal residence. As an aside, Yi Hye-Rin's home was a \$38 million mansion located in the top suburb of Seoul. The imposing size and the impressive majesty of it were more than enough to shock Joo Ji-Hyuk quite thoroughly.

At the same time, Sae-Jin decided to travel along with Yu Sae-Jung, who also got some time off as well. Because of the current state of the world, they couldn't go too far, so they just went to a small villa on the coast, to have some private fun.

The plan was for just the two of them to go and hide away for a while. Yet...

"Weren't we supposed to go alone? Like, just us two?"

Unfortunately, several hangers-on decided to pop in and ruin that plan – Rhosrahdel, Kim Sun-Ho, Hazeline, even Yu Baek-Song. It was a mystery how they found out, but they still showed up carrying their luggage.

"Yeah, me too. I was thinking the same..." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin replied to Yu Sae-Jung while sweating heavily. Hazeline quickly figured out the couple's unhappy moods, and told them not to worry.

"It's just that our direction's the same. Our purposes are

completely different, you know. Don't you think we should also enjoy potentially the last vacation in our lives, too?" (Hazeline)

If so, why were they shoving their bags into Sae-Jin's car? He was so dumbfounded, a hollow chuckle threatened to break out from his mouth.

"Let's go~!" (Yu Baek-Song)

Yu Baek-Song had climbed into the car before anyone noticed her, and shouted out loudly.

And so, Sae-Jin went off on a vacation with them, unable to do anything.

*

Yu Sae-Jung and Sae-Jin set up camp in the holiday villa, while the rest rented out a pension in its entirety for themselves. (TL: a pension is a small hotel or a boarding house usually found in France, not just a regular payment system by a government to retirees.)

This area was a famous vacation spot known for its scenic mountains and valleys, but, thanks to the current state of affairs, not one person was vacationing here.

Sae-Jin's group enjoyed the sights of the valley, now totally devoid of people – the incident of Hazeline nearly drowning because of Yu Baek-Song's prank notwithstanding.

Next, they held a BBQ, and in the evening, a campfire. The group had fun together.

In the beginning, Yu Sae-Jung was full of dissatisfaction, her shoulders drooping noticeably, but by the time they settled around the campfire, she was carrying around genuinely-happy expressions and told them it was "much more fun with everyone together."

[&]quot;See you guys tomorrow~."

After saying simple goodbyes, the group split into two.

As soon as Sae-Jin and Yu Sae-Jung returned to the villa, they took a shower together. Well, rather than together, it was more like Sae-Jin barging in while Yu Sae-Jung was in the middle of a shower, actually.

"Oppa, I'm tired... T, tired...."

Maybe she had used up too much energy in the bathroom – Sae-Jung was just about to fall into a deep slumber when she hit the bed.

Sae-Jin gave his best shot at first, but he soon gave up rousing her and had to be satisfied only with tightly embracing her.

Cool breezes sneaked in through the open windows, and the trees of the forest sang sorrowfully.

An unknown amount of time went by.

"Sae-Jung-ah."

Sae-Jin softly whispered into the ears of steadily-breathing Yu Sae-Jung.

".....Ng?"

Her voice was deeply drowsy.

He met his gaze with hers, and spoke with a serious voice.

"Let's get married." (Sae-Jin)

The lull of sleep left her in that moment, and Yu Sae-Jung's eyes widened in surprise.

"But.... just a little bit later." (Sae-Jin)

Then, her eyes narrowed in dissatisfaction this time. She pouted heavily and asked him.

"Why?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"I must go on a lengthy business trip to a faraway place, you see.

When I return, I'll explain everything." (Sae-Jin)

Yu Sae-Jung maintained silence for a long time. It was hard to read her expressions in this moonless night. However, the smile she formed after the long bout of silence was exceptionally bright and clear.

"How long will you go away for this time?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Not sure. I think..... it might take a while." (Sae-Jin)

"....And, if I wait for you?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

Sae-Jin chuckled slightly.

"I'll give you the rest of my life." (Sae-Jin)

"Euh-heuk. I'm gonna curl up here." (Yu Sae-Jung)

She playfully frowned deeply, but then, gifted him a long kiss right away. And he decided to accept this kiss as a sign from her agreeing to his conditions.

However....

Khoong-

Their gradually-heating up atmosphere got rudely interrupted by a strange tremor.

It wasn't a big one, but also, quite a bit unsettling to simply ignore.

Perhaps overcome with ominous feelings, Yu Sae-Jung's eyes snapped open and she tried to leave the bed – but, Sae-Jin stopped her.

"Oppa, just now..." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"It's okay. It'll be fine. So, just spend the night with me, here." (Sae-Jin)

The tremor was simply caused by the ground collapsing slightly after the Fissure opened up more than usual. There were still around two weeks to go. So....

"....You don't have to worry. I'll take care of everything." (Sae-Jin)

< 49. The Wait (1) > Fin.

Chapter 167: The Wait (2)

Sae-Jin and Yu Sae-Jung laid back down on the bed again. And then, while using each other's body as blankets, they tried to invite back the goddess of slumber.

The whispers of nature tickled their ears.

If time flowed by quietly like this, then surely, sleep would wash over them sooner rather than later.

Unfortunately, they overlooked one little thing – they hadn't come to this vacation by themselves.

The distance between the pension where the rest of the group were staying and the countryside villa was less than 15 minutes, and well, they ran to the villa and pounded on the front door like crazy.

"Sae-Jung!! Mister Sae-Jin!!"

"There must be something big happening right now!!"

"There was a strange tremor just now...."

"Hey, stop pushing, will you?!"

Several voices were chaotically mixed up, and ended up sounding like screams, or maybe bizarre roars of wild beasts. So, the couple had no choice but to exit the villa.

As soon as the front door was opened, five totally freaked out faces, on the verge of unconsciousness, even, greeted them. Sae-Jin tried to pacify them by saying there was nothing to worry about, but no one would relax simply because he told them to.

In the end, Sae-Jin told them to enter the villa, asked them to have a sit on the floor, and then, called a certain person waiting near the Fissure's location via phone – Lillia.

"So, how does the situation look right now?" (Sae-Jin)

- "The ground sank just a bit more." (Lillia)
- "What about Monsters? Has any come out?" (Sae-Jin)
- "No, but there should be still some time left before Monsters do show up." (Lillia) "In other words, it's nothing major, right?" (Sae-Jin)
 - ".....Yes, It's nothing big." (Lillia)
 - "Thank you very much." (Sae-Jin)

Hanging up the phone, Sae-Jin shrugged his shoulders.

"See? She says there's nothing to worry about." (Sae-Jin)

However, the various dumbstruck expressions on the group were something else to behold.

"What the, Mister Sae-Jin?! Just what is 'nothing to worry about' here?!"

"Shouldn't we return right away?"

"I just got a call from the President, you know."

"Wait a minute, who was that woman on the phone? Why does she sound so affectionate towards you?"

These words were spoken by Hazeline, Kim Sun-Ho, Yu Baek-Song, and Yu Sae-Jung, in that order.

"It's alright, everyone. It is really nothing to worry about." (Sae-Jin) "Hey, I said, who is that woman on the phone just now?" (Yu Sae-Jung) Sae-Jin looked at Yu Sae-Jung and her very serious expression, and let out a gentle chuckle.

Hey, you, that's not the most important issue here, you know.

"She's a person who will become a Guild member pretty soon." (Sae-Jin) "Really? How come I don't know who she is, then?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"I'll introduce her later." (Sae-Jin)

"......Hmph." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Yu Sae-Jung's eyes narrowed to a slit, full of suspicion. Hazeline glanced at the two, and shouted out in an urgent voice.

"Come on now, that's not the real problem here, Sae-Jung-ah!!"

In the end, the situation reverted back to chaos once more and Sae-Jin had no choice but to board the car heading back home.

*

The group arrived at the Fissure's location and confirmed the details with their own two eyes. Just as Lillia had explained, the ground surrounding the Fissure had simply collapsed just a tad, and nothing as worrisome as powerful, unknown demonic creatures popping out happened. Which meant, there was nothing for them to do here, and so, the group went their separate ways, their minds full of nervous worries and fears.

Two days later, Yi Hye-Rin and Joo Ji-Hyuk returned from their honeymoon break. As soon as they returned, they jumped straight back into being Knights.

Almost at the same time, the sect master of Jin Mudo, Yi Yu-Jin returned to Korea after finishing up the training of junior disciples overseas. As if to welcome her arrival, small and big Fissures began to spring up just about everywhere from that day onwards.

One appeared in the middle of a city, one on the coastline, sometimes even in the middle of the sky – over 100 sightings of new Fissures occurred every day.

Also, strange, dark-red mucous liquid oozed out from the underground Fissure that would later form the portal.

Thankfully, contrary to Bathory's fears, there was not one trace of unidentifiable creatures mixed among that disgusting liquid.

"Looks like there's still some time left, then." (Bathory)

While gritting her teeth, Bathory burned away every drop of that

mucous liquid filling up the underground space.

Sae-Jin studied her for a bit, before a smile formed on his lips. Because, he spotted small, faint crumbs of energy bar lightly coating the corners of her mouth. He heard that she'd been ordering Rhosrahdel around to procure and consume six energy bars of varying flavours every day.

Well, how would she react once she became a bit obese later on?

"You are going to get overweight, you know." (Sae-Jin)

"What? What bullsh*t are you spewing now?" (Bathory)

"....Nothing. Never mind." (Sae-Jin)

He shook his head and asked her instead.

"That's that, but, what will you do?" (Sae-Jin)

"About what?" (Bathory)

Bathory frowned slightly.

Sae-Jin's brows danced slightly as he spoke to her in an intimate voice.

"I would love it if you remained here, in this world. When I go there, without a doubt, your help will be greatly needed in stopping the Monster waves. You being here makes me feel quite secure and confident, you know? Hell, you alone should be more than enough to take on the workload of 7 billion people." (Sae-Jin) "....."

Bathory didn't say a word. He thought that was the silent refusal, but as it turned out, he was wrong.

Her voice belatedly leaked out, and well, the emotion of fear was weighing down greatly.

"Even I can't do it." (Bathory)

"What? Why?" (Sae-Jin)

"....There won't be an end to Monsters coming out of the portal,

that's why." (Bathory) "That won't be a problem. I'm going to close it." (Sae-Jin)

When he replied to her and smiled brightly, Bathory's expression crumpled all of a sudden and she shouted at him.

"Stop messing with me, you stupid f*cking c*nt idiot!!!" (Bathory)

"......And just where did you learn to speak like that?" (Sae-Jin)

"Doesn't matter where I learned it. You, you think you're a god or something? From the word go, it's completely impossible to close a portal that has been fully opened up. And then, let's not forget, Monsters pouring out from the said portal is on a whole new level of nastiness altogether! Those filthy, disgusting sons of b*tches have destroyed countless worlds until now, and even I can't win against them! If that portal remained open for one second, it'll be the end. The end, you hear me?" (Bathory) As soon as she finished shouting, her expressions darkened as if she recalled the events of the past.

He studied her for a minute or two, before walking towards the Fissure.

"Hey, hey!! W, where do you think you're going now?!" (Bathory)

The scared voice of Bathory came from behind him, but he ignored that for the moment and walked towards the border between the Fissure and the ground. He then peered into the darkness below.

Inside that deep, endless darkness, those b*stards were waiting. The mysterious, unknown b*stards, sometimes referred to as the devourer of worlds, or dimensions. He could clearly hear their violent, ominous pulsing with his ears of the wolf.

'Will I be able to do it?'

The wolf of Apocalypse, with its giant jaws touching the heavens and the earth below, devouring even the lands of the godly beings – that was Fenrir.

Inferring from the legendary tale, what he had to do couldn't have been any clearer even if he tried.

He had to jump in, wade inside that portal, and then – swallow whole the origin of this Fissure.

Of course, he was scared.

Also, there were several question marks that hadn't been answered yet.

It was a definite fact that the Sae-Jin from the diary, the future version of him, had indeed traveled to the past. However – did the world survive? And, just where was the future version of himself right now? Details of the events that happened after the jump to the past weren't recorded properly, so it was only natural he was full of questions. Was it because the future him gave the diary away to Lillia?

Suddenly, he thought about his parents. On the basis of the Nosferatus' faith, they also ended up trusting their yet-to-be born son.

A thin smile broke out on his lips, wondering whether it was the chicken or the egg that came first.

In the end, though – that didn't matter. Far more importantly, right now, he was finally 'connected' to his parents.

He spoke up with groundless confidence.

"I am going to succeed." (Sae-Jin)

"What?"

Bathory's voice was coming from somewhere surprisingly close. Also, he sensed that his sleeves were being held, too. Overcome with curiosity ever so slightly, Sae-Jin turned around to see what was what, and found Bathory trying to reel him back in, her body trembling in fear.

When he looked at her, a sneaky desire to pull a prank suddenly

reared its head.

"SFX for a loud, scary roar"

"K, keuahahrk!!"

She fell back on her b**t, completely shocked silly out of her mind. Her reaction was far greater than he expected. He chuckled and extended his hand to her, but then, with a loud slap!! she lit up his cheek.

"You rotten son of a b*tch!!" (Bathory)

".....Ha, haha... I'm sorry." (Sae-Jin)

Bathory snorted out figurative flames out of her nostrils while standing up. She then stomped angrily while walking away, but Sae-Jin grabbed her wrist and stopped her.

"Hey, before you go, give me an answer. Will you help me or not?" (Sae-Jin) "Ei, you crazy idiot trash. You really think your hair-brained plan will really work?!" (Bathory) He replied to her matter of factly.

"It will, with your help." (Sae-Jin)

"....Hmph."

Bathory didn't say anything, other than a short snort, as she turned around to leave. But there was not one trace of deception, lies, or anger in her movements. In other words, he could take that as her saying yes.

With that, his mind became a lot more relaxed now.

Left alone, he checked the situation once more.

Four days remained until the end of the 'deadline'. Strange phenomena were happening all around the world already – ominous signs such as the ground turning jet black occurred everywhere. People were afraid; everyday, protesters were marching violently, demanding the truth.

Sae-Jin ruminated on what he had to do inside this portal.

If he was brutally honest, then, rather than the obligation from the thoughts of 'I must do this in order to save the world' filling him up, it was instead the instinctive fear slowly overtaking everything, as the date loomed ever so closer.

Whenever he thought about the day in question, his heart pounded madly and even tears formed on the corners of his eyes. He dreamed nightmares throughout the night, and woke up drenched in cold perspiration.

This was probably the results born out of his self-doubt.

Could he really do it? If he had no Trait, then he would be an orphan who would've died as an orphan – a life even worse than an unremarkable one.

So, could someone like him really succeed? Such doubts and worries plagued him every single night.

If so, could he have lived a normal, boring life if no Trait manifested in him?

....If he thought about it, that wasn't possible. From the very beginning, a normal life was an impossible dream since his father was a 'Mah-in', and more importantly, he would've lived and died a worthless life where he'd have never met any of the precious people surrounding him now.

Such a life was completely worthless compared to the one he was living right now.

Right. He had no choice. In order to protect this happiness, he had no choice but to do it.

He wasn't doing it for the grand ideal of saving the world, but for the very personal and perhaps, even selfish reason of wanting to remain happy with his circle of precious friends and family.

That was all he needed.

So, he calmed his mind and took another peek into the darkness, wanting to see where he should bravely jump into, in order to make it back to the people he loved and cared about.

*

It was a lucky coincidence that the day before the portal would open up completely, was the date for the second scheduled gettogether for the Guild members. This time, even Yi Yu-Jin made it, after she missed the first one because of her trip to overseas at the time.

But, there wasn't much to talk about. No, rather than nothing to talk about, not one conversation happened between the members, instead.

Yu Sae-Jung was neck-deep in complicated thoughts; Hazeline was quietly sobbing away while leaning on Kim Yu-Rin's shoulders. Even the usually easy-going Yi Hye-Rin was seeking Joo Ji-Hyuk's arms to cry her heart out....

"Uh-whew, you hopeless fools. Seriously now." (Bathory)

Only Bathory remained 'brave', as she glared at everyone with a dissatisfied expression on her face.

Within this depressing atmosphere, Sae-Jin finally willed himself to open his mouth.

"Everyone, I am going on a... business trip, soon." (Sae-Jin)

Suddenly, thick silence descended and all gazes focused on him. Yu Sae-Jung was doing her absolute best not to cry, while every Guild member, such as Hazeline, Kim Sun-Ho, etc, were staring at him with dumbfounded eyes.

".....Pardon? You're going off to war?" (Hazeline) (TL: The Korean words for "business trip" and "joining the army/going to war" have a single spelling difference. Hence this rather... weak humour from the author...) Startled, Hazeline hurriedly stood up from her seat.

"No, a business trip. I'm going on a trip. It shouldn't be as dangerous as going to a war, though." (Sae-Jin) "B, but, that doesn't even make sense, right? I mean, under the current state of the world, just what kind of a business trip.........." (Kim Yu-Rin) At Kim Yu-Rin's query, Sae-Jin fell into a dilemma.

Should he tell them the truth? If so, then how should he break it to them? If he decides on how, then how far should he tell them?

But wasn't that all too much work?

Besides, his work was pretty easy. Technically speaking, of course.

A simple affair, where he'd definitely come back alive, and meet up with everyone sooner or later. And that would be the end.

So, he decided to gloss over it.

Besides, either Bathory or Lillia would explain everything later, anyways.

"Well, that.... You can hear it from either Miss Lillia, or from 'our' Miss Bathory over here later on." (Sae-Jin) "Why are you mentioning me, all of a sudden?" (Bathory)

"What? What did you say just now, Oppa? Our? Why is this woman suddenly 'our' Bathory?" (Yu Sae-Jung) Bathory glared sharply. And at the same time, Yu Sae-Jung's eyes gleamed dangerously after hearing the word 'our'. Coincidentally, their sharp, deadly eyes collided mid air.

The obvious loser from that exchange was Yu Sae-Jung. As soon as their eyes met, she lowered her tail real fast.

"No, wait. You should still give us a proper explanation. What kind of a business it is, how long you'll take, and what should we do in the meantime..." (Kim Yu-Rin) Kim Yu-Rin asked him with a serious face. Hazeline next to her nodded her head incessantly with a pair of extra large eyes.

"Really, it's nothing much. And, it won't take too long, either..... Probably." (Sae-Jin) From their perspective, most likely, 'it' wouldn't take long at all. Even if that wasn't the case, Sae-Jin dearly hoped that that would be the case.

"Besides, you know very well what you must do, anyways. Performing the duties of a Knight, that's what. Ah, that's right. I almost forgot – is the distribution of artifacts and armaments complete?" (Sae-Jin) The Monster had opened up the vault for the artifacts and the Orc Blacksmith's weapons, and distributed every single item to every Knight under the sun, with a pretext of renting them out 'unconditionally until the end of the current crisis'.

"....Yes. Everyone is apparently confused whether to feel elated or be saddened." (Kim Yu-Rin) "Well, that's fine. For now, let's go home early, since we don't know what new things might happen tomorrow." (Sae-Jin) Kim Sae-Jin spoke up to here, and an unusually bright smile formed on his face.

"Well, everyone. I'll see you guys at the next scheduled gettogether, okay?" (Sae-Jin) < 49. The Wait (2) > Fin.

Chapter 168: The Wait (3)

(TL: Told from MC's perspective.)

"One month? Or will it be two months?" (Yu Sae-Jung) It's the night before. Sae-Jung was asking me, while fidgeting within my arms. But I could not be sure how long it might take, so I was unable to answer her with anything concrete.

"Then, maybe three months?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

Sae-Jung's voice was getting progressively smaller.

".....Maybe." (Sae-Jin)

"....Four months?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

She was whispering now. I did my best to form a believable smile, and lightly kissed her forehead.

"I will come back as soon as I can. Hell, I might even show up tomorrow, as if nothing has happened at all." (Sae-Jin) "Liar." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"No, really." (Sae-Jin)

There was always the possibility, since the future was not set in stone. I spoke to her with a light grin, and Sae-Jung returned a bit more relaxed smile of her own.

"In that case, I should just select the venue and send out invitations in the meantime, right?" (Yu Sae-Jung) ".....Ng. Be ready and wait for me." (Sae-Jin)

I answered her like so, and hugged her tightly. Her petite body felt unusually pitiful and small today, for some reason. I even almost broke out in tears, but somehow, held back.

But not too long after, a soft sobbing stabbed into my ears. Sae-Jung was crying.

SFX for patting of the back

Unfortunately, the only thing I could do was to gently pat her back.

Right now, I wish the night would flow just a bit slower than normal.

*

(TL: Still told from MC's perspective.)

During the early dawn, when the sun hadn't broken the navy blue darkness just yet – I Spiritualised my diary and carried it to the location of the underground portal.

It had been only one day, yet the sight before me perfectly fitted the description "hell on earth" to a T.

Strange, monstrous beings that resembled snakes, dogs, etc, and then, there was that unidentifiable creature wriggling about within the black mucous substance... and Bathory was here, battling all by herself.

"Lots of mini portals opened up all over the planet now." (Bathory) She took a glance at my direction and told me while burning away the tide of Monsters.

"Half of those mini portals will act as doorways to another world, while the rest, well, they will become the gates of hell with Monsters pouring out." (Bathory) She spoke in a roundabout way to let me know that the time was finally up.

I walked towards the portal without saying anything.

The thing I had to do was exceedingly simple.

I just needed to wade through the portal, seemingly choked full with countless Monsters forcing their way out from the distant, unspeakably deep bottom.

It sounded rather simple, but it required an unimaginable amount of bravery, so I briefly wondered whether I should pour myself a stiff drink or not.

"Hey, you listening?" (Bathory)

I slightly turned my head to look at her.

"Yeah." (Sae-Jin)

"You really going to act according to that plan of yours? Even if you succeed, the end of the world won't change – the portal might close, but that won't take care of the remaining Monsters in this world, you know? And in case you fail, that's even worse than a dog's death, too." (Bathory) "....No need for useless talk, but let me ask you one thing. Bathory, you and your underlings aren't planning to jump into the portal, right?" (Sae-Jin) Inside this portal, there was a 'door' that allowed one to go to the past, or to another world, a new dimension.

" "

Bathory bit her lower lip as if she had thought about this matter over and over again. And the answer coming from that deep deliberation was a wonderful one, the kind I really liked hearing.

"I'm remaining here." (Bathory)

"Very good." (Sae-Jin)

As if she didn't care for my grin, her eyes narrowed to a slit while she spoke.

"...It's not because you persuaded me, okay? Well, my homeworld ravaged by these motherf*ckers isn't my old homeworld anymore, anyway." (Bathory) "It's the correct decision." (Sae-Jin)

Now that Bathory agreed to help, there was nothing to stop me here. There was no need for a grand ceremony, either. Oh, and no point in hesitating, too.

I transformed into the Lycan Form, and carefully observed the other side of the portal.

The portal was spitting out things as if it was erupting out like a

volcano. These things kind of resembled bits of human flesh, but also wriggled around like an individual organism.

That grotesque sight was truly disgusting, but at the same time, fear inducing.

But I needed to be brave.

In order to live, this was something I just had to do.

"Well, I'm off." (Sae-Jin)

I didn't need a countdown.

The ticking of a clock would only erode my resolve, anyway.

With a simple leap, I jumped down into the portal.

"What the?! H, hey!! Wait a sec...." (Bathory)

I heard Bathory's surprised voice behind me.

But soon enough, all sounds disappeared, and I sank deeper and deeper into the gap of nothingness.

*

(TL: Still from MC's... well, you get the idea.)

The sticky, unwelcome sensation of the mucous membrane only hung around in the beginning; as time passed, I could feel nothing at all. It was as if the sensation of touch had been robbed from me.

I tried to look around.

I once heard that the inside of a portal resembled that of the wild, unclaimed nature, but all I saw was the jet-black darkness. Even the stars that blinked faintly in the distance got swallowed up by this all-conquering darkness.

Was I looking at the vast expanse of the outer space?

Wait, didn't the space also form a part of the 'nature', too?

My mind got drowsy and my thoughts were blurring.

It was hard to tell whether I was still breathing, moving, or even

if I was still alive or dead.

Suddenly, a turbid stream of something rushed past me quite violently, and it shot up and up.

Within this black stream, I witnessed the hidden creatures' pulsing beats and felt their maddened eyes on me.

But thanks to them, I remembered the reason why I was here in the first place.

I had to go to where this stream came from, so I fixed my heading opposite to the direction of the flow.

And then, time flowed and flowed.

Was it a minute, or one hour? One day? Maybe a month, or even a whole year?

Trapped within this unexplainable 'world', I feared that my ego, the sense of self, would retard and scatter away, never to become whole again.

'There....'

Not too long after, or perhaps an eternity later, a massive black 'gap' that looked like a blackhole revealed itself in the far distance.

That 'blackhole' quivered continuously and spat out monstrous creatures nonstop.

Instinctively, my eyes snapped open wide.

My fatigued and weakened body was revitalised by the pulse of life, and it felt like my head was burning up now.

As if they had sensed the change, the creatures spat out from the blackhole left the turbid stream and surrounded me, clinging onto me. Unexpectedly, it felt very cold, and painful, too.

So, I transformed into the Fenrir.

[The host has transformed into the legendary Fenrir! For the next (12) hours, the Wolf that kills gods, Fenrir...]

Suddenly, my eye level changed, and my sight cleared up completely.

A Monster busy clinging onto my waist seemed as small as a speck of dust.

Even the blackhole looked like a slightly big cotton candy to me.

So, I swallowed it whole, just like that.

The blackhole got crushed like a pulp and got sucked into my mouth.

[An existence that can not be handled by the host has been absorbed...]

If this was what I had to do, then well, without a fanfare, I've done it.

But then, too many of the Monsters had left towards Earth. If I was to help Bathory and kill them, I had to go back as soon as possible.

'It hurts a bit, though...'

But my body didn't want to move.

Was this a severe case of indigestion? Or was I dying for good?

Unable to budge an inch, I just floated within the dark emptiness while submerged in thoughts. One possibility I've been denying until now entered my head.

Perhaps, did the future me die and no longer exist?

It really did feel like that was the case. It really was a persuasive argument, and I stopped my endless voyage.

I wanted to disappear along with the cold yet burning sensation of the stars wrapping around my body, and every little thing wriggling so naughtily within me.

I began recalling old memories, one by one.

I remembered going home while holding mom's hand when I was

really young... but then, I couldn't recall anything for the next 15 years after that.

Maybe that was par for the course, really. Before my Trait manifested, I lived a shadow-like life where I was neither alive nor dead, after all.

However, the memories of the past five years were so, so vivid and real.

I met Kim Yu-Rin, met Hazeline, met Yu Sae-Jung, met Kim Yu-Sohn, and met Joo Ji-Hyuk, and, and.... a brilliantly shining life interconnected by many encounters and friendships.

Only then, my purpose and resolve finally surfaced from the muddy, sleepy waters of my fading consciousness.

I couldn't stop here. I promised Sae-Jung that I'd return, after all.

And besides – there was something else I still had to do. In order to succeed in pretty much anything, taking 'care of the aftermaths' was very important.

My mind spun faster than ever before.

The future version of me, whose whereabouts were unknown.

The existence called as the devourer of the dimensions, a being that not even Bathory could stand up against.

And finally, the time required for the divine creature of the legends, the Leviathan, to mature fully.

And I found my answer.

When I opened my eyes, I saw a dim point of light far, far away.

With all my might, I began doggie-pedalling towards that light.

"*SFX for retching*"

Suddenly, I felt nauseous. The portal to the past was over there, yet the gap between the worlds and its immense pressure was

forcibly restraining me.

In order to endure, I gritted my teeth and transformed into the Leviathan Form.

[The Skill "Ultimate Resistance" has been activated. The host will resist the universe's laws and its suppression for a short period of time.]

The alert window said as much, yet it felt like my limbs were twisting apart at the seams and my entire being felt like melting from the terrifying heat.

But I did not give up.

I dashed towards that point of light nonstop.

And only after all my scales were burned away, when my eyes got seared into blindness and the world became nothing but darkness, only then...

I exited into the brilliant brightness of the sunlight.

(TL: Still told from MC's viewpoint.)

I opened my eyes.

The first thing I saw was the bright sunlight and the densely packed verdant forest. I remained on my back for the next five minutes while trying to figure out what was going on, before standing up in a hurry.

Was I in a human's appearance?

Yes, I was.

What about the alert windows?

They worked just fine.

"Whew...."

A sigh of relief escaped from my lips automatically.

After getting a hold of myself, I found some leeway to check out the surrounding area.

""

But I became speechless soon enough.

There were no skyscrapers. There were no asphalt roads. There were no modern buildings either.

What greeted me was a whole bunch of traditional houses with tiled and thatched roofs, a fortress and watchtowers, many horsedrawn carts and carriages, and finally, the smell of cow manure serving as fertiliser.

Yep, the sight before my eyes were straight out of the Joseon era. (TL: a Korean dynasty established in 1392. Lasted until 1910.) "....So, that's why nothing was written on the diary about this part, huh."

I muttered to myself.

It was impossible to figure out what the year was. Well, I thought that I might need 500 to 600 years if the Leviathan needed to reach the maturity, so, let's say this was 550 years back in the past.

And, if I was to sleep for half a year, then that meant I had to spend at least 1000 days wide awake.

"Hmm...."

For some reason, "hmm" continued to leak out of my lips.

Okay, I should think this over thoroughly.

500 years should be more than enough for the Leviathan Form to reach adulthood. A fully-grown Leviathan should be able to fight against the devourer of the dimensions, or so referred to as by Bathory herself.

I already resolved myself to the possibility of a lengthy wait. Well, I was going to wait far longer than I expected, though.

I raised my head and stared into the far off distance.

A blue ocean was gently undulating over yonder like silk under the clear sunlight.

That must have been the East Sea. Meaning, my bedroom was right over there.

"....Oh well. Naught but to wait, I guess."

I would wait.

If I endure, endure, and endure a bit more, then it'd be the correct time sooner rather than later.

(TL:...Still told from the MC's point of view.)

When the Leviathan went to sleep, it'd be for three months straight. And when it woke up, well, it had to stay awake for a week. Most of the time while I was in slumber, I remained at the bottom of the ocean, but when I was awake, I walked around Joseon to see what was what.

And so, I got to witness with my own two eyes, the historical moment when the creation of Hunmumjeong-eum took place; the wretchedness and horrors of the Japanese invasion between 1592 and 1598; the humiliation of the Manchu War of 1636. (TL: Hunmumjeong-eum is the original Korean alphabet system invented under the rule of King Sejong.) I lost count how many times I clenched my fist while watching the foreign invaders rape and pillage the land; when witnessing the common folk suffer through horrible unfairness completely unimaginable in a modern society.

But I never once tried to do something that might change the history.

Things I could influence were limited to a few events, after all.

And so, time continued to flow by while I waited.

I remained awake for only three weeks a year, but still, the remaining days were just too many.

It became progressively harder to maintain my sanity.

Sometimes, I missed everyone terribly.

Sometimes, my urges became a problem.

Sometimes, a rage that couldn't be kept down tried to drown me.

Every passing day was a torture, and I gradually grew to fear the sun setting and the moon rising over each passing day.

That was why, I sometimes went to a village of human beings.

Rather happily enough, I could converse just fine with people, although there were some differences in pronunciation and the meaning of certain words.

"Barmaid, get me a bowl of rice and soup, please."

I got a hankering for food with grain, so I sought out a traditional roadside tavern. A big dude with 188 centimetre tall height was ordering with a loud voice, so perhaps inevitably, all attention got focused to my direction. While I waited for my food in somewhat of a daze, a man who had been watching me with strange eyes initiated a conversation.

"You have a good physique there, young man."

"Haha. Thank you." (Sae-Jin)

"Are you perchance a military man?"

"No, just a commoner." (Sae-Jin)

"Hmm...."

The man stroked his lengthy beard and nodded his head.

Then, my food arrived.

I couldn't help but stare at the small bowl and a pathetically small amount of grub inside, and then, chuckled softly.

"I see that the current state of affairs for us common folk aren't so good right now." (Sae-Jin) "But of course. We haven't had rain for quite some time now, as if the gods have become annoyed with us."

"No rain has fallen?" (Sae-Jin)

"Indeed. This drought is lasting longer than previous years, too... It's quite a worrisome matter, really."

The man looked really worried as he sighed out.

I smirked slightly while looking at him.

"Rain... rain, you say. Well, you might have rain later on today." (Sae-Jin) ".....What do you mean?"

The man tilted his head slightly, but soon, a sneer formed on his lips and he asked me again.

"Are you perchance a shaman?"

"Well, close enough." (Sae-Jin)

"Huhuhuh."

The man laughed. But it wasn't just him now – everyone here in the tavern was laughing along as well.

"What a funny person he is."

"He looks fine on the outside, yet..."

They were sneering out comments one after the other.

"Haha. Well, we shall see later on." (Sae-Jin)

I simply carried a thick smile on my face.

< 49. The Wait (3) > Fin.

Chapter 169: The Wait (4)

(TL: The whole chapter is told from the MC's perspective.)

Causing rain to fall was a rather easy job for me. After I gathered water particles in the atmosphere and created cumulonimbus clouds, rain fell on the following day.

"Oh, here he comes!"

Under the grey sky and thick, incessant falling rain drops, I entered the roadside tavern while raindrops slid off the large straw hat I was wearing at the time, to find men from yesterday waiting for me with stunned faces.

"Fella, you have the divine touch!"

The first guy to talk to me showed off an especially exaggerated reaction. He barged his way through and occupied a seat right next to mine.

"Haha. Barmaid, a bowl of rice and soup, please." (Sae-Jin)

First things first, I ordered food. Meanwhile, the guy asked me with a face of a man dying of curiosity.

"How did you know?"

"I simply asked god, that's all." (Sae-Jin)

Both eyes of the man went extra round.

"Are you saying you can talk to a god?"

"Well, something like that." (Sae-Jin)

"That is amazing!"

While we laughed and conversed in not very important topics, my grub was placed on the table.

And well, I could see that the amount had doubled compared to yesterday.

"Ohh, looks delicious." (Sae-Jin)

"You know, the next district to ours is also suffering through a drought, so, is it possible to find out when it'll rain over there?"

Hearing the man's query, I smiled deeply while shoving the rice in my mouth.

"Most likely, about two days later." (Sae-Jin)

"Two days later.... Ah, dang it. We haven't even introduced ourselves, yet, have we? I am called Yi Si-Eup. And you're...."

"Unni~, Here's your ingredients~."

It was then, a refreshingly open and honest voice tickled my ears. I took a glance and saw a young girl. The guy followed my gaze, and then grinned lewdly while poking my side with his elbow.

"It seems like your eyes are working just fine, huh. She's the most beautiful girl in our village, you see. She's a bit on the young side, but well, her age's just about right to get married, don't you think so?" (Yi Si-Eup) "....."

To call her the most beautiful was.... Maybe my standard had risen or something, but she only seemed just about above average to me. Couldn't be sure whether such a view was because of the era I was in or not, though.

I smirked slightly and shook my head.

"I already have someone waiting for me." (Sae-Jin)

"But, you haven't even had sangtu done yet?" (TL: Sangtu is a hairstyle reserved only for "adult" males in the Joseon-era Korea.) "....Keum. I will have it done once I go back home." (Sae-Jin)

"Is that right? How regrettable. Hum, hum. Oii, barmaid, give me the same rice and soup bowl as this young man over here."

However, Yi Si-Eup received only half a bowl and as a side dish, and received an earful of complaints. The barmaid, the tavern owner as it turned out, told him to settle his tab first.

I grinned faintly and gazed at the two, then felt a pair of eyes on me.

Turning my head around, I found that 'most beautiful girl in the county' staring at me quite openly.

"Heup!!"

When our eyes met, she shyly averted her gaze, somewhat in a hurry.

But soon enough, her eyes stealthily sought me out again, only to meet my gaze once more.

"!!!! U, unni, I'm going now."

In the end, she left the tavern as if running away.

"Heuhmmm."

Hmm. Without a doubt, the 'value' of my appearance was great, no matter what era it was.

I swept my hair back, full of unnecessary pride.

But, well – it seemed that the folks of the village were far more interested in me predicting the rain, rather than how I looked like.

A short time passed by before more villagers rushed in to the tavern.

As if the rumour had gotten around, even the people from the neighbouring villages showed up hurriedly and asked about the rain.

"....You might get some rain at your side around four days from today." (Sae-Jin) "W, what about our village?"

"You don't have to worry, as it'll rain there very soon." (Sae-Jin) After that day, I somehow ended up acting as a spokesperson for the gods.

But I found it quite fun, being among the simple and honest folks.

And as I began staying within the village, even a few housewives developed a sort of 'interest' in me as well.

Of course, the 'most beautiful girl' in the village was included in that group, but well, my standards had been increased after being together with Yu Sae-Jung for so long.... I came up with an excuse of me being an aimless wanderer, and politely declined all of their advances.

A week went by, and the time for me to go to 'sleep' arrived once more.

"You're heading off now?"

"Yes. I shall return in three months' time." (Sae-Jin)

"Three months, you say.... How regrettable. You were indeed the only person I could talk to properly around here. Folks around these parts are too simple and straightforward, you see."

"Haha. I actually preferred that, Yi Si-Eup ong." (TL: "Ong" is an archaic form of honorific, used to address an older male.) I lowered my head.

"Be safe on your way. And don't forget to stop by."

With the dignified farewell from the man, Yi Si-Eup, behind me, I left the village that I grew rather fond of during this short stay.

*

Beneath the deep sea that seemed to swallow all sunlight, I opened my eyes. Already, three months had gone by.

I checked the alert windows first. Too bad, the Leviathan Form only grew by a fraction of a percent.

A disappointed groan automatically escaped my mouth. However, that groan morphed into a violent underwater storm and rushed towards the surface. Startled silly by this mistake, I quickly reined in the wayward flow of water and reverted back to the human's appearance.

Once I got to the shore, I yawned out loudly and stretched my limbs out. Then, I headed back to the village.

It'd been only three months, yet the most beautiful girl in the village, the one who was said to like me very much, had settled down with another dude already. The husband was a farmer well known in the village for being honest and hard-working. She was somewhat flustered by my resurgence, but I simply congratulated with a generous smile.

Yi Si-Eup welcomed me back with open arms. He didn't ask me about the rain, though – but did inquire if I'd be willing to help out during the Autumn harvest. Of course, I agreed to do it. Well, I was confident of working harder and smarter than a cow, at any rate.

However, I realised how difficult it was. Harvesting required skill, far more than actual physical strength, as it turned out.

But, maybe due to the Goblin's Craftsmanship Skill, I was able to rapidly adopt to the job. By the end of the fourth day, I had become the greatest farmer on earth – going so as far as to take on the entire village's workload by myself.

The week's worth of time flew by like an arrow as I helped out with the harvest, and I had to go and sleep once more.

I bid everyone a much harder farewell compared to the last time and returned to the ocean.

Afterwards, every three months, when the seasons changed, I visited the same village.

The villagers always welcomed me back, and fun things always happened there.

This was a simple life, a lifestyle I found to be my liking.

However.... the villagers and I weren't living on the same flow of time; as the days went by, sorrowful events began to occur.

Three years later, the very first person to engage me in small

talk, Yi Si-Eup, contracted tuberculosis and passed away.

Two years after that, his wife also passed on.

A year after that, the barmaid of the tavern I frequented came down with an illness. Naturally, the tavern had to close.

It was over six years to them. It was just over three months for me.

With that much time passing by, it became increasingly difficult to visit the village anymore. People began suspecting me who didn't seem to age one bit. Some started treating me as if I was a god, while a few idiots who thought I was some kind of a devil also emerged.

And so, I had to leave the village for good.

Afterwards, I never remained in one village for too long, and wandered around without a destination.

Flowers bloomed and wilted countless times; monsoon flooded the world numerous times; and snow dyed the ground white many more times.

I thought of living through the ages as my duty, a job that I had to do and lived on, while disinterestedly watching the world flow by.

Coincidentally, I ran into 'Dasan' Jeong Yak-Yong.

Just as he was known in the history book, I got to see his saintlike actions first hand.

And then, the period of In-Law Governance of the Joseon era, that would eventually cause the downfall of the kingdom, began. Every village I went to, people seemed to get more distrusting and callous than before; and the number of highwaymen attacking travelers increased as well.

When Gojong became the new king, his royal regent Prince Yi Ha-Eung seized all political power.

He controlled all the royal relatives, pursued isolation policy, and enjoyed his rise to prominence for a while.

But his wild ambitions couldn't last long.

An unidentified battleship entered the territorial waters of <u>Ganghwa island</u>.

It was the Ganghwa island incident of 1875.

Completely humiliated by a lone warship, Joseon was forced to sign the Treaty of Ganghwa on February 27, 1876.

On <u>Gapsin</u>-nyun, a coup happened. But the gallant youths couldn't even endure until the first signs of snow melting, and either died or ran away.

The <u>Donghak Peasant Revolution</u> failed, and I witnessed the announcement of the <u>Protectorate Treaty</u> between Japan and Joseon.

And on first of March that year, I watched as the sadness and anger of the citizens who had lost their country spread out like the undulating ripples on the water's surface.

I saw the young men of this country, forcibly drafted into military service because of another's imperialistic desire to conquer.

However, the sun still rose every morning, and time continued to flow by without care.

Today, five hundred years after my arrival in 1440, was August 15th, 1940, exactly five years before the liberation from the Japanese Occupation.

"Alcohol... is it."

I was walking on the streets of Gyeongseong, when I spotted a Western-style establishment that had opened its doors not too long ago. I haven't touched a drop of the good stuff for the past 100 years or so. Having had my interest piqued, I headed there. (TL:

Gyeongseong was the name of Seoul while under Japanese Occupation.) *SFX for a doorbell chiming*

The bell clanged loudly as I pushed the door open. There were quite a few patrons within the joint, yet, there must be something about my tall height and the dignified-looking long beard – everyone's attention was focused on me almost immediately.

For now, I pulled my hat down deeply and found an empty spot at the bar, then ordered a glass of expensive imported liquor. As I was taking a couple of sips, a certain man not too far from me caught my eyes.

He had a pair of straight-cut eyebrows; his lips were resolutely shut, and his eyes gleamed sharply, as if he was staring into the far off distance.

His appearance alone showed that he was a man's man, yet, as far as performing his duties went, he seemed to be a complete noob.

There was this faint whiff of chemicals from his bag, and then, he was nervously checking his watch every five minutes or so.

I could tell that he was a man about to do something 'very big'.

I spoke to a barkeep and sent a bottle of the most expensive tipple this joint had over to that guy.

He seemed quite flustered initially, but when he finally located me, he bowed his head in thanks.

I didn't stop there, and initiated a conversation with him.

"What's your name?" (Sae-Jin)

The man seemed to be surprised at my Korean and trembled a little bit, but still managed to answer me.

"It's Yu Hyung-Jin."

Yu Hyung-Jin..... Yu Hyung-Jin. When I thought about it, I realised I had heard of this name before.

I tilted my head a little and asked him.

"By any chance, do you have a son?" (Sae-Jin)

The man, Yu Hyung-Jin, deliberated a bit before answering me.

"....I do."

"May I ask for his name?" (Sae-Jin)

"Why are you suddenly inquiring after my child's name?"

"Is it fine to think of it as the payment for the drink?" (Sae-Jin) Only then, he replied with a slightly unwilling face.

"....It's Yu Dae-Ho."

Suddenly, a lightbulb went off in my head.

Yu Dae-Ho.

That was the name of Yu Sae-Jung's grandfather. The founder of the Dawn Corporation, too.

And this man here, Yu Hyung-Jin. The father of Yu Dae-Ho, he was a freedom fighter who carried out a bombing five years before the liberation. But, he unfortunately didn't get to see the new dawn's sun rising; he breathed his last after five years of being locked up behind the bars.

Wasn't the award the Dawn Corporation gave to outstanding people of the society called 'Yu Hyung-Jin' award?

"And who you might be, asking these strange questions?" (Yu Hyung-Jin) Yu Hyung-Jin asked with a suspicious glint in his eyes. Seeing that his hand was lowering towards his waist, he must be reaching towards his revolver.

"I am the same human as you." (Sae-Jin)

While speaking like this, I pulled out a lump of pure yellow thing from my inner pocket. Since it was cumbersome to carry all the different currency of the history, I chose to carry around a few items of value instead, and now was the perfect time to use them. Yu Hyung-Jin looked at me with a confused face and asked again.

"That's right. Carrying out an important mission would mean nothing if your family goes to bed starving. Take these, and use them for your child's education." (Sae-Jin) I handed over four 500g gold ingots to him. Yu Hyung-Jin's eyes were dyeing in the colours of pure panic.

"These are pure gold. No matter what anyone else says, they are gold. Remember that, and take them." (Sae-Jin) "W, why are you..."

"I told you. For your child's education." (Sae-Jin)

Yu Hyung-Jin swallowed nervously. But, I couldn't see a single trace of greed in his eyes, only the desperation he felt for the family he was about to leave behind.

"What are you waiting for? Take them with you, already." (Sae-Jin) When I urged him on, he hesitantly reached out towards the gold ingots.

"However!!" (Sae-Jin)

Just as his hands touched the gold, I roughly grabbed his arm.

"You must swear you will never use these for your personal gain. You must swear that you'll never give these to the resistance movement, and that you will only spend them for your family." (Sae-Jin) Well, these gold ingots needed to become the starting capital for Yu Dae-Ho in the future, after all.

Yu Hyung-Jin stared at me with dumbfounded eyes, and soon, nodded his head.

"...I will."

[&]quot;Same human as me...?" (Yu Hyung-Jin)

[&]quot;I was searching for you until now." (Sae-Jin)

[&]quot;Searching for me?" (Yu Hyung-Jin)

After that encounter with the unexpected person, I headed back to the hotel I was staying at.

Pouring myself another glass of that imported liquor, I sat down on a chair and opened my diary.

The diary that I looked at whenever I missed everyone so much, whenever I was about to lose sense of who I was. There were stains from my fingers, along with dried spots of tears, clearly visible on the pages.

"I have waited for a really long time, haven't I." (Sae-Jin)

Enduring for over 500 years, the day I encountered Lillia for the first time was drawing nearer.

The date was another five years after the liberation.

I've already heard about the very first place Lillia began her journey on this planet from her own mouth, so I knew where to go.

Thump, thump...

It'd been a long time, and my heart began pounding heavily once more.

Finally, the independence arrived, and within the desperate poverty of the people, five years flew by.

And the date today was June 20th, 1950 – five days before the Korean War commenced.

I went to the underwater cavern near Gangwon Province, the one Lillia told me about. She said that, back then, she was the Nosferatu's advanced scout and had crossed over before everyone else, in order to suss out potential places for her clansmen to live.

And well, I found her – a silhouette of an old man with his bent back, checking out the cavern with the head tilted slightly as if

deep in thought. If I pull off that robe, then she'd return to the appearance of a woman.

I sneaked to her rear and lightly tapped on her shoulder.

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"Hi there." (Sae-Jin)
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Her robe melted away powerlessly, and Lillia screamed out in curse words while falling on her rear.

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"…?"
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Even I was taken back. Was Lillia's original personality like this? That face definitely belonged to Lillia, so....

Her face completely reddened now, Lillia continued to pour out curses as if she had no clue of my inner turmoil.

"Stpem fabohac racehobiack!!!"

"....Speak in Korean, will you." (Sae-Jin)

"Fragh!!"

"I told you to speak in Korean." (Sae-Jin)

As if she had finally understood me, Lillia took several deep breaths, and then....

"What the f*ck!!!! Who the f*ck are you, you son of a b*tch?!" (Lillia) I became completely speechless.

But, well – me getting older wasn't a waste of time, after all. I had matured enough not to get flustered by the advent of an unexpected situation, and be able to figure out what was going on calmly enough.

Right. 70 years into the past, then her age would be just about on the money for the youthful, energetic phase.

Didn't someone once say that even a mighty mountain would change in ten years? In that case, such a massive change in personality could certainly happen, sure.

[&]quot;%\$&*!!!!!! Gracehobiack?!?!"

"Die! Die! Diiiiie!!" (Lillia)

Well before I could gather myself properly, Lillia began swinging her sharp nails quite aggressively.

I easily evaded her attacks, reached out with my hand, and tightly grasped her neck.

Five minutes later....

"I'm terribly sorry....."

She was kneeling on the floor with a black eye decorating her face.

< 49. The Wait (4) > Fin.

("Dasan" Jeong Yak-Yong: a Korean philosopher who lived between 1762 to 1836. 'Dasan' is a title he was known by, and it simply means 'the mountain of tea'. He has a Wikipedia page in English if you're curious.)

(The Ganghwa Island Incident refers to when a Japanese warship entered Joseon's territorial waters under the pretext of searching for drinkable water. Battle ensued and Joseon lost, leading to the signing of the Treaty which gave Japan a lot of benefits.)

(Gapsin Coup has also a dedicated Wikipedia page in English. A Gapsin-nyun is an ancient calendar system used in Joseon era – in the modern calendar system, it's 1884. Think of it as those Edo or whatever system you read about in Japanese WN, and you're almost there)

(Donghak Peasant Revolution also has a fairly substantial Wikipedia page, in English. Go check it out if you're interested, especially if you wish to find out what eventually led to the Sino-Japanese War – the clue: this failed revolution.)

(Japan-Korea Protectorate Treaty was signed on at the end of February, 1904. Another one was signed on 1905, which completely deprived Korea of sovereignty. The dedicated Wikipedia page can

tell you a lot more than me and this small space, so if you have the time, check it out.)

Chapter 170: In the End (1)

A Vampire's lifespan was usually twice that of a modern-day human being. Plus, the nobler a bloodline was, the longer the life expectancy became; and then, there were unique Vampires with ageless appearance as well those boasting much, much longer lifespan as well, such as that el Las kid. So, after considering all those points, Lillia decided that she'd refuse to believe Sae-Jin was a human being.

"You say you're a human, yet you've lived for how long...?" (Lillia)

Her expressions showed her complete failure to understand this quandary. Of course, this was par for the course, really.

To 'share' the same time period with others were a prerequisite element to being alive, so, no longer constrained by the normal flow of time, Sae-Jin came very close to losing his sense of self, his ego.

"....Technically, I haven't lived for that long time. The actual time I spent awake is only around 50 years or so." (Sae-Jin)

Waiting around had become too much burden to endure. It was just too unbearable nowadays.

Hell, he even ended up suffering the worst of all bad inflictions he could've come down with – insomnia. He probably couldn't fall asleep for almost two years back then.

Whenever he remembered back to those times, Sae-Jin had to wonder just how he had endured until now. It was to a point where even he himself was mystified by it, and felt somewhat proud, as well.

Whatever the case may have been, the Leviathan's growth rate had finally reached 95%. If he waited for another 70 years or so, he was confident of reaching the fully matured state.

"Lillia, there's something I want to ask you about." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin looked down at the kneeling Lillia and grinned slightly. Even at that simple gesture, she was trembling quite pitifully. She was reminded of the past not too long ago when she got mercilessly pummeled by nothing more than Sae-Jin's single magic spell, that was why.

"And your reply should be...?" (Sae-Jin)

"Y, yes, sir. Ask me anything..." (Lillia)

Compared to how on the knife-edge she sounded before the beating, her voice was far more softer now. It sounded more or less like Lillia from his memories, so Sae-Jin felt quite chuffed by that.

"By any chance, do you want to go back to your homeworld?" (Sae-Jin)

In a way, what he asked about was completely out of the blue. Lillia became dazed for a minute there, before she shook her head quite vigorously.

"No, no, no. No way. I can't go back to that hellhole now..." (Lillia)

"But, what if you could go back?" (Sae-Jin)

".....Eh?"

To be absolutely honest, if he were to take care of the Vampire Lord and that el Las kid as they were about to cross over, then the world would not experience the Fissure opening up way ahead of schedule, like how it was with his future. According to Bathory, it would've only opened up naturally after 100 years or so.

However.

It was indeed a terribly selfish wish of his, but if he did stop them now, then it was unknown whether 'he' would be able to meet any of those precious people or not. They might even forget about the existence of 'Kim Sae-Jin' altogether, as well.

What was the real purpose of him waiting and enduring the past 600 years? What was it?

Wasn't it simply because he wanted to see them again?

He came to the past to save the world because, in the process of saving everyone, he also benefited from that as well.

There was no grand reason. That was it, his sole purpose.

That was why... he'd never ever do something that might threaten the direction of the future.

"I don't understand what you're telling me...." (Lillia)

"I'll explain the details to you later. For now, listen. I came from the future, Lillia." (Sae-Jin)

"Eii, what nonsense are y.... Euh?! Wha?!?! Kkyaahh!!!!" (Lillia)

No need for a lengthy chat – he simply transformed into the Leviathan. It was quite a sight seeing Lillia's expression quickly change from shock, panic and then to pure, unbridled fear.

However, there was something he had overlooked just now – and that was the fact that his body size had ballooned up to a terrifying level recently.

After all, a Leviathan's size was too big for the girth of the Han River to contend with, so how could a measly little underwater cavern even dare to try containing him?

The divine creature of the oceans that resembled the legendary dragons grew larger and larger and larger, until it eventually slammed into the cavern's ceiling and started a massive tremor.

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"#$%@?!!!" (Lillia)
```

Lillia screamed out in terror and fell back on her b**t again. Sae-Jin hurriedly reverted back to the human form, but by then, as if its 'lifespan' had come to an end, the entire cavern began to quake and collapse all around them. "We, we need to escape..... Kkyaaahck!!" (Lillia)

KKKHOO-GU-GU-GUONG

And finally, the cavern broke apart.

Sae-Jin grabbed the screaming woman's shoulder and initiated instant transmission.

When he opened his eyes, they had arrived at the bottom of a certain cliff – the place where the Nosferatus had made their nest.

"Euh....."

Lillia had shut her eyes so tightly, her eyelids were trembling quite noticeably.

Sae-Jin patted her head and spoke up.

"You guys stay here from now on. You can avoid the Lord's eye in here, too. And, this place is sturdy enough that even after you carve out an underground city, the earth will hold just fine." (Sae-Jin)

Only then, Lillia opened her eyes. And she stared at his gentle smile with absentminded eyes.

"Follow me." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin placed his palm on the surface of the cliff's face, and activated a magic spell. And on the path where his magic flowed by, a passageway opened up.

"I've opened up the space. As for construction, I'm sure you can do that better than me." (Sae-Jin)

Sae-Jin finished creating an underground cavern with a size big enough to accommodate around ten thousand Nosferatus, and was about to take out his diary – but, he felt doubt creep up, so he sneaked a glance at Lillia's direction.

The appearance of her surveying the surroundings with a dumbfounded face made her look completely unprepared and way

too naïve, so he figured it was too early for her to handle this book.

"....But, before that." (Sae-Jin)

His baritone voice resounded deeply.

"Let's depart on a training journey for a while." (Sae-Jin)

"Excuse me?" (Lillia)

Lillia tilted her head in confusion.

"What are you even.... Excuse me, I can't even begin to fathom what the heck is going on here right now, you know? And it hadn't even been a day since we met, s...." (Lillia)

Before she could finish, Sae-Jin activated instant transmission once more.

The new scenery before their eyes was an uninhabited island literally in the middle of nowhere.

"What the hell?!" (Lillia)

"Temper your personality. The future 'you' is not a ruffian like the current you." (Sae-Jin)

"Calling me a ruffian.... No, wait a minute. I am supposed to become the next leader of all Nosferatus, so I can't be wasting time like this! And besides, it really hasn't been even a day since we me... Kkhyack!!" (Lillia)

Without saying a word, Sae-Jin fired off a blast of air. Swept away by that forceful push, Lillia fell into the ocean and then, began shouting while splashing water everywhere.

"H, hey!! I can't swim!! Save me!!!!" (Lillia)

"SFX for an old-fashioned guffaw Learn to save yourself." (Sae-Jin)

SFX for struggling to breathe while sinking

Lillia's arms and legs hurriedly thrashed about, and she continued to spit out seawater out of her mouth as she rapidly

began to drown.

"Please, help me!! Save me!!" (Lillia)

"No. This is all a part of training jour...." (Sae-Jin)

"Save me, you rotten son of a b****tch!!!!" (Lillia)

"....."

He really thought that he'd forgotten about how to get angry, but before he knew it, Sae-Jin was already gritting his teeth.

Other than the odd occasions where she had to enter the city limits to guide the arriving Nosferatus to their new underground base, Lillia spent close to half a year in that uninhabited island with Sae-Jin as the only company.

During that time, a ton of rehabilitation (?) training happened. He taught her magic and how to swim; the importance of the stable supply of sustenance; told her of things that would happen in the future, thereby doing his best to change and fortify Lillia's mindset.

And the end result was that, Lillia got to possess some semblance of that composed, relaxed demeanor Sae-Jin saw from her in the future.

After thinking that this much was enough, Sae-Jin said his farewell to her exactly on the 200th day of the training.

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"I'm going now." (Sae-Jin)

"Eh?"

"What, you don't want me to leave?" (Sae-Jin)

"No, no!! That's not it!" (Lillia)
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Maybe he was too hard on her until now? Lillia's expression as she vigorously nodded her head was stuck somewhere between joy and regret. Of course, the scale leaned ever so closer to joy. While grinning, Sae-Jin added one more thing.

"Right. This is your freedom, the one you've been dearly praying for. By the way, if you happen to find out the exact location of the Lord's hidey hole, let me know via communication magic, okay?" (Sae-Jin)

"Oh, sure.... Uh? But, why would you need that...?" (Lillia)

"There's something I gotta do." (Sae-Jin)

The Lord said that he had misplaced the treasure that controlled the survival instincts of Vampires, their bloodlust. However, unless he was suffering from a powerful dementia brought on by his extremely advanced age, there was just no way he'd 'misplace' something that incredibly valuable. No, it'd make more sense if someone stole it away, instead.

And the thief responsible for that would be.... Well, there was no strict reason to mention that now, was there?

"Sure, I understand." (Lillia)

As if she desired to get rid of Sae-Jin as soon as possible, Lillia answered quickly.

"Also..." (Sae-Jin)

Smack!

"Ah-ahck."

Since he didn't find her attitude all that nice, Sae-Jin flicked her forehead, and then, pulled out the diary. Lillia stared at it with blank eyes, before finally asking him aloud.

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".....This is?" (Lillia)
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"It's the diary of the future I wrote in the past. It'll work out better if you tell the others it's a book of prophecy, or something like that. Then, they'll believe you even more." (Sae-Jin)

"Ah, in other words, all the things that will happen from now on

are..." (Lillia)

"Right. Make a copy, mock it up to look like an ancient tome or such, and hand it over to the Lord, as well." (Sae-Jin)

Lillia reached out and snatched the diary away, before trying to open it willy-nilly, so Sae-Jin hurriedly grabbed her hands.

"Keheum!!"

Then, he glared at her, full of intimidating pressure that implied she should read it when he wasn't here.

Lillia quickly understood the gist of the stare and nodded her head, before hiding the diary within her clothes.

"Okay, then. I'll be on my way. I will see you later. I shall stop by at your place once before it gets too late. Got it?" (Sae-Jin)

SFX for a sudden flash of light

Sae-Jin turned into blue light, before disappearing from the spot.

Left alone, Lillia cautiously turned her head to survey her surroundings, before opening up the cover of the diary.

*

Three years flew by after meeting with Lillia.

As the citizens of the world were gradually discovering the presence of other worlds, Lillia finally uncovered the hiding place of the Vampire Lord. He was slumming it out underground beneath the city of London.

After receiving the coordinates, Sae-Jin used instant transmission and arrived at the Lord's residence.

The Lord had been weakened considerably after crossing over from his homeworld recently, so only a small dosage of the sleeping potion was needed to knock him out cold. And Sae-Jin was able to snatch away the Lord's most prized possession rather easily. It was a bloodstone that shined with a sinister reddish hue – the Phantom Bloodstone.

Sae-Jin had no idea how to use it, but whatever, it was still the most important weapon passed down from one Vampire Lord to another.

Kwadeuk!!

Without a shred of hesitation, Sae-Jin destroyed it.

No matter how valuable a tool was, if it was created to rule over other people, then it shouldn't even exist in the first place, after all.

*

(TL: Told from the MC's perspective.)

Time continued to flow by.

The density of Mana on Earth increased everyday, leading to many strange phenomena to occur. And the world went through a big upheaval and a certain change at the same time, when the presence of refugees and migrants from another world came to be widely known as well.

When Monsters began appearing, new professions called 'Knights' and 'Wizards' were created to deal with the rising threat. The very first Wizard Tower and the Knights Order were established in the USA, and soon afterwards, many more sprang up all over the globe as if they were in a race or something.

During this period of transition, several immigrants from the other world found themselves unable to integrate with the Earth's society and its rules, and began committing various crimes – violent actions of Mah-ins that seemed to know no end, and several mysterious missing persons cases that were suspected to be the work of Vampires, etc, etc.

In order to handle these criminal activities, another profession

called 'Mercenaries' got invented.

It happened in the year of 1990. Unable to endure anymore, the countries around the world agreed to call for the extermination of the Mah-ins first. Several thousands, tens of thousands of Mah-ins were executed without a chance for rehabilitation.

And five years after that, the sharp ends of the vengeful spear of mankind wielded under the blinding rage were now pointing towards the Vampires. It was beginning of the so-called war with the Vampires.

And so.... the world moved towards the future that I grew up to know.

On a certain Autumn day in 2010.

I stood on a street of a certain city in Gangwon.

It was to meet again with someone I wanted to see so much.

I really wanted to meet her before this day, but I had to endure it. I feared that something unexpected might happen, so I didn't even dare to look on from far away, as well.

Maybe, I wasn't supposed to meet today either. I had no idea what kind of butterfly effect today's meeting might cause...

However, my hopes were resting on one significant fact:

Before my mother passed away, she was seen talking to a strange man.

However, the el Las kid or his lackeys had no reason to talk to her in the first place. They were even planning to implicate the Bathorys after murdering my mom, by leaving behind a fake clue – so, they wouldn't do something that might trace back to them, after all.

On that day deeply imprinted in my head, the day I still clearly remember... The day before mom passed away – the day we went to a photo studio.

I came to the bridge where we shared our final goodbyes.

If I waited for a bit here, then soon, mom and the younger version of me would pass by.

And then, she would proceed to gift me an wound that may never be healed.

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"Ah...." (Sae-Jin)
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I thought that my tear ducts had dried up due to my advanced age, but just by thinking about it, tears were overflowing out from my eyes.

Thinking about how I'd get to see, and hear, her face and voice that were about to fade from my memories, so many emotions were acting up almost beyond my control.

But, I gritted my teeth and stopped my tears.

It was then.

From afar, I saw a brightly smiling duo of a mother and her son. Seeing her appearance that was so familiar to me, all those tears I desperately held back began pouring out like a waterfall. Strength abandoned my legs and I plopped down to the ground. This was my first time feeling such a powerful mental enervation.

"Sae-Jin-ah, mommy has to go to work for a bit, so...."

I heard her gentle voice so vividly. I was trying to steel my heart, but in that brief moment, it got shattered apart. My throat clammed up and I couldn't speak anymore; and I couldn't push my powerless knees to straighten up at all.

"My Sae-Jin can head home alone, right?"

Mom sent me home first, by telling me there was something she had to do.

And so, that child would head home all alone, very soon.

And then, mom would leave me forever.

"Ng!"

Meanwhile, the boy energetically replied and ran towards home.

And mom gazed at the back of the running boy absentmindedly.

I watched them, busy wiping away my tears. This was my one true final chance. I couldn't simply stop here.

I pushed myself up with both hands. I forcibly stood up. I wiped tears off my messy face and slowly approached her.

Towards her, the one that I was eagerly waiting for.

< 50. In the End (1) > Fin.

Chapter 171: In the End (2)

(TL: Told from the MC's perspective.)

When I approached her, mom's eyes opened up wide in suspicion.

But, I just couldn't say anything. My throat clammed up; my chest felt so tight, and I had no idea just how much she knew about this version of me.

And so, we simply stood there, staring at each other.

Wind blew in from somewhere and leaves issued a sorrowful wail.

Mom's long, soft hair danced along with the wind.

"Excuse me...?" (Sae-Jin's mom)

In the end, mom spoke up first.

But, when I heard her voice, my knees buckled so much that I couldn't remain standing anymore. I had to reach out and hold on to the railing of the bridge. Mom quietly gazed at me for a while, before a gentle smile spread on her lips.

"Is there something wrong?" (Sae-Jin's mom)

".....Ah."

Mom questioned.

I needed to answer her.

My throat was still clammy, but I squeezed out my vocal cord to the very limit.

".....You're very beautiful." (Sae-Jin)

There were so many things I wanted to tell her – to tell her at length, with little more detail, containing all my 'truths'.

But, I didn't. I just couldn't.

Every time I tried to speak, tears flooded down my throat, so how could I be able to string out a decent sentence?

As if she had misunderstood my words somewhat, an awkward smile broke out on mom's lips.

"Ahaha.... Thank you for your kind words, but I'm married." (Sae-Jin's mom) ".....How regrettable." (Sae-Jin)

I somehow squeezed out two more words, and my head dropped.

I wiped the corners of my eyes while moans leaked out of my lips.

Mom approached me with a slightly worried expression after hearing me.

"Are you alright? You don't have to be that sad..." (Mom)

I shouldn't be doing this.

No, I must try to memorise every inch of her face, so even when an eternity passed by, I'd still be able to remember her.

Her gentle voice, her beautiful face, her swaying hair.... All of those, I must carry them deep within my head, deep within my heart...

"I'm not sad.... Just happy." (Sae-Jin)

Suddenly, a thicket somewhere trembled audibly. Mom took a quick glance at the direction. And I too was desperately aware of what this chain of events meant.

"Ah, in that case, should we... talk about it for a little while?" (Mom) Mom smiled and spoke to me, in order to lengthen her life just a bit further – to buy time from those b*stards in hiding.

Just that, anxiety and sadness had permeated thickly into every part of that smile.

".....Why?" (Sae-Jin)

My answer ended up sounding blunt and curt. Because, I might end up crying even harder if I smiled.

Mom replied, never losing her sad smile.

"You remind me of my husband, you see." (Mom)

I couldn't remember what I said as a reply to those words. (TL: please refer to my TL note at the end of the chapter.) "No, he died. During his job." (Mom)

If it was possible, I also wanted to meet my father. But, then again, to a person I've not really 'seen' the face before, what was there for me to do and say?

But, mom still showed me the photo of her husband. My dad.

As soon as I saw the pic, I spat out the words almost instinctively.

"Wow.... You're right." (Sae-Jin)

"You see? You really do resemble him." (Mom)

My heart felt like it might explode any time now, while I struggled to hold back my tears. So, I said whatever that just popped up in my head. (TL: here as well, refer to my TL note below.) "Well, I guess so.... He was a terrible man, leaving behind me and our son all alone..." (Mom) Their son. A son. Son.

It was only a single word, yet it echoed more beautifully than any known birds singing sweetly, at least to my ears. (TL: Again, please refer to my TL notes.) "What do you mean, he's ugly? He's a really beautiful kid, you know? He's smart, handsome, full of aegyo.... He is a carbon copy of your husband, indeed." (Sae-Jin) Really, really, it's true.

Mom chuckled.

"You really think so?" (Mom)

However.... that was the last of mom's smiles.

We had to say goodbyes now.

"It's already this late now.... I think, you should go now." (Mom) I didn't want to.

I really wanted to tell her that, as soon as I leave, she would die. However, mom was already aware of this fact.

If that was the case, should I just run over to that thicket and kill the b*stards hiding in there?

But.... I knew very well that I couldn't.

There was one more thing I had to tell her before that.

"One last thing..." (Sae-Jin)

I was sure that, if I said any more than this, I'd end up crying.

So, might as well tell her straight.

"Forgive me, because this is our first encounter, but..." (Sae-Jin) While tears fell, I confessed.

"I.... I really love you." (Sae-Jin)

And that was how I said farewell to my mom.

I developed a problem since that day.

I couldn't sleep again.

Was it because I slept too much until now, or was it because I was scared of forgetting her face and her voice that I've carefully stored in my heart, during my long slumber?

Whatever the case might have been, I spent my waiting days submerged at the bottom of the ocean, while suffering through a heavy, nasty bout of insomnia. Although it was incredibly lonely down there, I had no choice but to stay, since the Leviathan Form's growth accelerated faster the deeper the sea was.

Another ten years went by, and now, it was the year 1999. (TL: I didn't make a mistake here; this is how it is in the raw. Just calculate the correct date by yourselves, folks...) Carrying around a hollow pair of eyes, I went to see Lillia. There was something I had to do.

Spending the last 50 years or so as the leader of her clan had helped Lillia to transform into the gentle, relaxed and calm person that he remembered.

"....I've really changed after looking after so many people. It's as you said, Mister Sae-Jin." (Lillia) I smirked a little after hearing her.

Now that I finally met another living, breathing person, I could somehow recover some part of my lost leisurely demeanor.

"But, what brings you here to us today?" (Lillia)

Without saying anything, I handed two scales of the Leviathan that I had ripped off in advance, over to her. Lillia tilted her head slightly while receiving the scales.

"These are.... Oh!" (Lillia)

"That's right. You've read about it in the diary, no? You keep one with you until 'I' show up in the future, and the other one... you give it to the el Las people a few years from now."

The el Las used this scale as the summoning medium to summon a Leviathan to the Han River. And that was where 'Kim Sae-Jin' earned the ability to transform into the Leviathan.

"But... can the 'same' persons exist so close by to one another?" (Lillia) ".....Probably, no." (Sae-Jin)

One shouldn't take lightly the forces of the cosmos. Never.

The reason why the 'same persons' were existing within the 'same universe' due to 'unknown cause' was quite simple, really – before the error was discovered, it wouldn't be an error in the first place.

However, if these 'same persons' confirmed each other's existences – then, well, only the stronger version of that person would remain in existence.

"But it won't matter. Me of that time period isn't a Leviathan,

anyways." (Sae-Jin) Well, Kim Sae-Jin of the current time period couldn't transform into a Leviathan. That was why I felt confident that the cosmos wouldn't be able to figure out the error and interfere.

"By the way, can't you just hand out lots more scales? I mean, the growth afterwards would be astonishing, right?" (Lillia) "Two scales are the limit. Even then, don't forget that enough time between the two must be observed as well. Ingest anymore than that, then I fear the past me and the future me would become 'assimilated' and disappear altogether." (Sae-Jin) "Ah...... that's a distinct possibility. I'll do as you have instructed." (Lillia) "Thanks." (Sae-Jin)

I smiled in satisfaction.

*

The news of Yu Sae-Jung becoming the youngest-ever Knight rode on the airwaves and entered my ears. Soon after that, I also heard Kim Yu-Rin, surviving a serious attempt on her life through a Goblin's kindness, exposing the internal power struggle happening behind the closed doors of the Raven Knights Order, and then, becoming a Highest Tier Knight.

In the meantime, 'Kim Sae-Jin' kept himself busy and revealed a potion called 'A Goblins' Kindness' to the world.

While underwater, I pushed the senses of sight and hearing to the absolute maximum, so I could watch and listen to all the news that transpired in the world. I wasn't worried about getting 'old', since the Leviathan Form prevented the effects of aging to affect the main body.

But during the past couple of decades or so, while waiting for the arrival of one certain day, many difficult thoughts and worries piled up in my head.

Could the measly me really stop those b*stards coming out of the

Fissure/portal?

And even if I could kill them all, would I be able to live among all the precious people, just like how it used to be?

If I was to count my physical age, thanks to the unceasing flow of time, Bathory's age was an unfunny joke to me now; and if I was to count my mental age, then... Yu Sae-Jung would be like a small child as well. Even if she became a wonderful wife that was mature beyond her years, would I be able to love her, like I once used to?

While submerged deep underwater, I mulled on these thoughts for a long, long time.

And when I had just about reached the point where I couldn't tell whether I was the ocean or the ocean had become me, I could no longer endure it and came ashore.

I headed off to a small and simple town.

There were quite a few people here. But, because of my senses were enhanced beyond belief, every strain of thought and every type of emotion were clearly 'legible' to me.

I shook hands incorrectly, and ended up breaking a person's hand, even. I spent too much time underwater and forgot how to control my strength properly.

If I was a Knight – no, if I was a human, I'd be able to control my physical strength through either manipulating Mana or with the help of a Trait.

But I was no longer a human.

Because, this strength, this body, belonged to an existence that was not a human....

That was why... I couldn't dare to brave myself back into the society anymore.

In the end, I returned to the depths of the ocean and simply chose to watch and listen through my senses, instead. And then... on that day.

A summoning magic's chant entered my consciousness.

I agreed to it, and when I opened my eyes, I found myself at the Han River.

And at the distance, I saw the restaurant where Kim Sae-Jin – me, Yu Sae-Jung, and Kim Yu-Rin were together.

I was quite dazed by this, but came to my senses soon enough. I shouldn't remain inert, after all.

SFX for a loud roar

I immediately issued out a roar.

Screams of the regular people resounded out from everywhere, and not too long after that, Kim Yu-Rin jumped out from the window while shattering the glass.

And as expected, she ignored everything and hit me in the forehead with her sword.

I could feel her Trait, 'Desideratum', activating.

Of course, it didn't hurt at all.

So, the real reason why she was able knock out the Leviathan with her Trait wasn't because of the weak-sauce excuse of the divine creature's power halving due to the summoning process. No, that happened only because the Leviathan itself wished to get 'knocked out' from her attack.

Well, I welcomed her hit with open arms and fell into a sweet slumber. It may have been a short one, but it'd been too long since I had one.

And when I woke up around ten minutes later, the deep navy blue that could even be described as pure darkness greeted me back.

Yes, it was the exact same location that I spent the proverbial

eternity in.

However, I began chuckling to myself, instead.

Because, it wouldn't be too long now.

This extreme loneliness, this intense longing....

The end of them all were now in sight.

.....Still.

At the end of all this waiting, just what was I supposed to do?

There was the loud sound of the Fissure vibrating.

My entire body shuddered in unbridled joy.

Strange, unknown creatures began invading the ocean.

I opened my eyes and laughed out loudly.

Finally, I could liberate myself from this unending perpetuity and search for my own flow of time.

And just as my entire being shook feverishly with my heart pounding away in madness....

A certain scene popped up into my head, as if I pressed play on a video clip.

"Well, I'm off."

And that was of me about to leave the flow of time a long time ago.

I wanted to ask that guy, if he could even begin to imagine how long he would have to wait and fight against the most cruel loneliness ever conceivable to a man.

But me, well, 'he' just left, not knowing anything and not wanting to know anything.

And then... as promised, Bathory began her desperate struggle alongside humanity to fight against the horde of dimensional

invaders.

Unfortunately, the black mucous substance broke out from the ground in the end, and rose up higher and higher to the sky. What would be the most correct term to describe the massive being that finally stood on earth? The disgusting son of a b*tch? No, there should be an even more fitting swear word for that thing.

Thankfully, the creature spent the rest of the day still stuck inside the mucous membrane covering it.

On the following day, the membrane evaporated somewhat, and the creature's arm was exposed.

Jet-black skin, and blue veins visible underneath it.

Emboldened by the liberation of its limb, the creature swung its freed arm. Without much fanfare, more than half of all military and Knight personnel waiting there, got wiped out.

However, the creature didn't do anything else besides that.

It wasn't some kind of a moron who threw away all the good food and then ate the scraps off the floor.

No, it was pure arrogance on display.

Another day went by. Its right arm got freed this time.

But still, the creature didn't make another movement.

Most likely, the ugly face hidden behind the mucous membrane was smiling insidiously.

Too bad for the b*stard, I too was looking at it with a thick smile occupying my face.

Would the creature ever realise the fact that its arrogance, conceit, and ego had in fact brought on about its own demise?

And finally. The next day.

Just as the creature's two legs gained their freedom...

The alert window that I was waiting for all these years finally

rose up.

[The growth of the Leviathan has been completed.]

[Condition complete: 'Enduring the harsh eternity, like an Imoogi ascending to become a Dragon'.]

[The host will evolve into the Dragon of the Oceans, Bahamut.]

[Condition complete: 'Plea of the Gaia'.]

[The Skill '???' has been unlocked and it has been upgraded to the unique ability, 'Divinity'.]

Finally, I had escaped the perpetuity of time.

And now, time to go to war.

< 50. In the End (2) > Fin.

(TL: There should've been several texts of MC talking to his mom, but the author decided to omit them for some unknown reason. Thus, when reading those parts in raw, it barely makes any sense, flow of conversation wise. The last curious omission is for the words spoken by the MC's mom, where she obviously said something that made MC reply that way and defend his younger self. I've tried to alter as little as possible to keep the original "meaning" of what the author probably wanted to convey. Anyways, I'm leaving this note here as a sort of heads-up – although, if you got this far, then you have read past them already, so I guess it's all cool...)

Chapter 172: In the End (3)

Billions of people dazedly looked on at the horrifying existence standing tall – some through their naked eyes, while others, through the airwaves.

Funnily enough, even with the absolutely terrifying and unimaginable threat standing right in front, not one cliched occasion of some nutter proclaiming the end of the world could be seen. No incidents of robbery, violence, rape, etc, etc, happened, either.

Everyone simply stared at the creature with eyes completely lost within the pits of despair – the being that just stood there, not affected in the slightest by the combined might of the military, Knights, and Wizards, with not one person able to tell what it was planning to do.

[It has been now confirmed via the testimony of the first generation migrants, that the being on screen is called the 'Dimensional Devourer'. Although it is one level lower in terms of danger compared to the 'Universe Devourer', we have learned that this creature has destroyed countless worlds already.]

Even under this kind of situation, the news channels faithfully carried out their duties.

However, this piece of information delivered with such desperation ended up sounding like a horrifying eulogy to all those stationed at the battlefront.

"What's the current situation? Do we have enough leeway to pour all our attacks on that b*stard?" (Kim Hyun-Seok)

The supreme commander of the gathered forces, Kim Hyun-Seok, asked a junior Knight, while his body was covered from head to toe in unidentified blood and dirt.

"We are at the very limit of our capacity trying to deal with the

new Monsters emerging from the Fissure, as well as existing Monsters running amok under that b*stard's influences, sir!"

".....D*mn it." (Kim Hyun-Seok)

Kim Hyun-Seok spat out a low groan. But, in all honesty, he too expected something like this. The only things they could do right now, were to quell the rampaging Monsters, or simply observe that damnable 'Devourer'.

But, even doing that wasn't easy.

The battalion of soldiers desperately guarding the frontlines with all their might got destroyed with a single swing of the giant creature's fist, and more than half of the gathered Knights seemed to have lost their dang collective minds after witnessing that incredible display of power.

Not to mention, mental and physical strain of the troops fighting for the past five days straight without a break or sleep were taking their toll as well. Kim Hyun-Seok even saw several soldiers deserting their posts and running away.

He couldn't imagine a situation worse than this one.

"...We still need to hold the line." (Kim Hyun-Seok)

Of course, Kim Hyun-Seok could not give up here. Knights, as well as the military, were the citizens' so-called psychological 'Maginot' line. So, if he and his men were to retreat from here, then the country, even the entire world, wouldn't be able to survive. No, he couldn't back away from here, even if it was only to repay the faith and love people had shown them until now.

"Yes, sir. Understood."

The subordinate Knight nodded his head and took his leave.

Kim Hyun-Seok grasped his sword tightly and glared at the giant creature that he couldn't still take in its entirety even with his neck tilted way back. This was the only thing he could do for now.

For the first time in his life, he could truly feel the inadequacy of his powers.

It was now noon, yet the sun was still blocked by the jet-black clouds, and very little light was coming through.

And, just as the Korea's best Knight stared at the heavens and lamented the fact that he couldn't do anything...

Something that could only be described as quite bizarre happened.

"....What the hell is that?"

The 'beginning' was nothing more than someone murmuring out in a daze. That was all. No one paid him any mind. However, this person didn't let it go, and poked the Knight next to him with an elbow.

The poked Knight was way too tired to even get annoyed, so he had to endure the abuse for a bit of time, before finally turning his gaze towards the direction his pokey friend was pointing at.

And then, he ended up doing the exact same poking thing with another Knight next to him.

That was how the eyes of the Knights gradually rose up to the sky, one by one.

With enough time passing by, the need to poke others with elbows had dissipated, and in the end, even camera lenses were taking in the sights of the emergence... of a new unknown being.

From within the beating, swirling storm of winds that seemed to rip apart those murky, dark clouds, a mystical creature slowly revealed itself.

Spreading out its noble and pure blue-coloured wings widely, its deep yet dignified eyes looked down on the world below, and its powerful and resolutely-shut maws pointed towards the Dimensional Devourer.

Knights, soldiers, even normal people couldn't even begin to fathom the identity of that creature.

However, strangely enough, they all could faintly guess what it could be.

That creature was an exact copy of the dragon in the fairytales and legends of the yore.

"What the...."

Just before the gathered Knights could fall into a collective dilemma of choosing between whether to celebrate this new development, or to throw away even the last vestige of hope – the dragon-like being lunged at the still-awakening Devourer.

The world got twisted apart momentarily from the air pressure and noise generated by that powerful, mad rush forward.

Needing only a blink of an eye that felt like the flow of time had been distorted, the dragon arrived by the side of the Devourer and wrapped the tail around it – then, began gathering a massive amount of Mana in the mouth.

And the Devourer, until now inert and simply observing, hurriedly moved its arms and grabbed the dragon's – Bahamut's – tail.

Too bad, it was one step too late.

A jet-black Breath beam was fired out without special sound effects and blew away the Devourer's head.

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"What....?"
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"Huh...."

And there they were, unable to damage the Devourer no matter what they tried – jaws of the gathered Knights dropped to the floor, after witnessing empty spot where the giant creature's head should have been.

However, the Devourer wasn't dead. Although now headless, it moved its one arm and two legs to fiercely resist.

That was the signal for the mighty physical struggle between these two titans that shook the entire world.

An indescribable scene of battle unfolded, where fists and front claws, kicks and tail whips were exchanged endlessly.

However, after losing its head, the Devourer had lost its sense of sight and all it could do was flail its arms and legs about wildly.

Of course, those simple actions alone possessed incredible danger. Sae-Jin had found it difficult to properly control his new wings and was helpless when he got punched by a blind swing and flew away. Then, he even got kicked in the stomach, as well.

Only after he spat out black blood out, he decided to deal with this b*stard using magic.

Still, the Devourer proved to be not a simple opponent at all. As soon as it sensed the activation of magic, it too responded with magic of its own. The only difference was, the Devourer's did not just aim at the dragon only.

It was targeting the entire world. The sole purpose was to destroy.

Bahamut hurriedly fired off a Breath. In the end, though – Sae-Jin returned to fighting it physically, in order to prevent the fountain of blood from the Devourer's destroyed arm landing on the ground below. To stop it from using magic ever again, he hit it even harder than before.

But, well, from the very beginning of this battle, there could only be one destined victor between the headless Dimensional Devourer and Bahamut with all its body parts still intact.

The longer the fight dragged on, the Devourer's ability to make

judgments suffered, and in the end, it threw its arms and legs wildly as if it had forgotten how to use magic completely. That only lasted until another Breath from Bahamut pierced its heart.

....And so, the Dimensional Devourer that seemingly possessed no equal in this world, fell while issuing a bizarre cry that sounded like an animal, and scattered away into black smoke.

Only the silence remained afterwards.

Not even screams, cheers, loud shouts, or praises could be heard.

This remained true even for the reporters broadcasting the event live, the anchors relaying it to the ordinary people, as well as those said people watching on.

This silence was so suffocating and unreal that tens of thousands souls gathered here ended up imagining this was all just a long and harsh nightmare instead.

Within this stillness, Bahamut slowly flew away.

While blood poured out from numerous wounds on his body, the dragon desperately flew towards the East Sea where he would be healed.

Only after he had drifted away eastward, and after a considerable length of time went by, did the remaining army of fighters realise what had just happened.

One by one, they began approaching the position where the Devourer used to stand with numb and dazed minds.

With the exception of giant craters where the Devourer's massive feet stepped on, there really was no trace of the Monster itself.

The reality finally dawned on them and they stared up at the heavens above.

Just in time, the dark clouds drifted away and several bright rays of sun shone brilliantly down on the ground.

And so, the world would never forget the beauty of the sunlight

(TL: Told from the MC's perspective.)

It was a difficult, yet ultimately hollow battle that, after its conclusion, was hard to recall exactly what had transpired.

That was why, as I laid this body that was so close to death by the depths of the ocean, I couldn't really remember anything.

Although, I did sense the faint pulsing of this planet, Earth.

And also, I could more or less understand that the planet was thanking me.

I was confident that it was gratitude.

A lifeform wished to live.

It was the same whether you were a human, an animal, or a Monster – even, Earth too.

The planet wished to survive. It wished for its salvation. That was why it deliberately created 'Traits'. So, the truth was completely opposite to all those experts that yammered on about 'Fissures creating Traits'.

The fruit of that desperate struggle, created in order to find even the tiniest hint of possibility for survival – born out of the irresponsible mentality of 'anything is fine, so please, let one stick', that was Trait.

That was why, I knew I'd wake up for sure, sooner or later.

The warmth of the divine energy wrapping around me while I remained submerged deep underwater was the proof of this.

Also, the texts 'Plea of the Gaia has been completed' appearing in front of my eyes were another proof.

I was only entering a deep slumber, just like how it always had been.

And soon, I would be able to meet up with the others.

And, I would be able to love them as an ordinary person by then.

I truly believed that would come to pass.

(TL: Told from Yu Sae-Jung's perspective.)

With the appearance of the legendary creature, Bahamut, the world finally found peace.

The unstoppable calamity, the Dimensional Devourer was defeated at the claws of Bahamut, and soon, many Fissures opening up around the world began to close for good, one by one.

However, at the same time, small chaos ensued as well. Because, all Traits had suddenly vanished into thin air.

Many, who enjoyed charmed lives but now had to live like the rest of normal people, couldn't quite come to grips with this reality and were wading through pits of despair.

Of course, those like Joo Ji-Hyuk and Yu Sae-Jung, whose egos weren't inflated by their Traits, had no problem whatsoever adopting to the new life.

On the flip side, Mana and Monsters didn't disappear. One thing that did change was that Monsters couldn't replenish their numbers through the 'external supply' anymore and had to live, breed, and perish in the exact same manner of every other normal wild animal.

Of course, if Monsters were exterminated, that would cause too much of a shock to the world's system, so they would not be pushed towards extinction. Instead, they were to be reared by mankind.

A month after the passing of the great calamity, a religion worshipping Bahamut sprang up. People were disappointed and distrustful towards the pre-existing religions that didn't offer any real, tangible aid during the most obvious apocalyptic threat ever recorded in history – and also, with an uncanny timing, several 'followers' of Bahamut popped up suddenly, too.

The pre-existing religions offered the usual line of excuses, even going as far as to say that their gods had sent Bahamut to humanity and all that, but with the exception of a small percentage, modern humans weren't delusional enough to fall for such empty claims.

Inevitably, after the religion came the organisation, and eventually, the Bahamut organisation's greatest temple of worship was built on the very spot where the Dimensional Devourer was felled. This place became the holy land that many worshippers from all corners of the globe made pilgrimage to.

A religion that became one of the biggest in the world through only a single moment, the Bahamut Church – and the leader of this organisation was Lillia.

And also....

'He' had disappeared.

No one knew where he had vanished to.

Did he run away because he fell in love with another woman, or did he migrate to another world after he got scared by the prospect of the world coming to an end...?

And it seemed like the only person who knew the details was the Bathory woman, but it was difficult to meet with her, and when I somehow found a chance to ask her, she refused to give me a straight answer.

I could only spend the time alone, with no one to blame.

I found out for the first time in my life that prolonged longing could morph into powerful heartache. But, I endured, believing that I would see him sooner or later.

And so.... a year went by, without him by my side.

Finally, the date for the regular gathering of The Monster Guild had arrived. So, I tidied myself up and went there.

'All Guild members must attend the meeting.'

I was so sure that he wouldn't forget the one real rule he came up with for the Guild he created with his own hands.

After all, the gathering was supposed to take place on the 17th of every month, but in his consideration, it had been changed into an annual event, instead.

So, he should show up on this one. He must.

The gathering was scheduled for seven in the evening, and I arrived at 6:30. However, everyone was here already. Kim Yu-Rin unni, the Tower Lord Hazeline, the member of parliament Yu Baek-Song, the married couple Joo Ji-Hyuk and Yi Hye-Rin, Bathory and Rhosrahdel, as well as Kim Sun-Ho and the rest of the newbie members.

Everyone greeted me with welcoming faces.

Yet, only one person was missing.

"You came?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Yu-Rin unni asked me first. I forced out a smile.

"Yes. Unni, I heard you've been really busy lately? It must've been really difficult to find a gap in your schedule... Thank you for coming today." (Yu Sae-Jung)

As soon as Monsters became existences that needed to be reared for the future rather than to be exterminated on sight, Yu-Rin unni left the world of Knights immediately without any regrets.

And then, she concentrated on the entertainment industry side of things.

She made a success out of three, four variety shows she appeared in as a regular cast member, and her debut as an actress was a roaring success as well. So, nowadays the name 'Kim Yu-Rin' was better known as a celebrity rather than a former Knight. Understandably so, she was incredibly busy in her life due to all of her entertainment industry commitments.

But, even though she was busy, she found time to continue her work as the 'Orc Enthusiast'. The thing was, many Hero Orcs still existed – they even rescued many ordinary people attempting to run away from the rampaging Monsters, and offered shelter within their village. Which in turn, made them into national treasures of Korean people.

"That's true, but I still wouldn't miss this gathering." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"No wait, Sae-Jung-ah. This unni, she only came here to see whether he's coming or not. You gotta watch out now. This person here, as much as you, she wants to see hi..." (Yi Hye-Rin)

"Uh-muh. What could you possibly be talking about?" (TL: 'uh-muh' = 'oh my, my.') (Kim Yu-Rin)

Yi Hye-Rin added some spice in a playful attempt to get a rise out of her, but now that Kim Yu-Rin had escaped from beneath the weighty burden of being a Knight, and thereby becoming much more relaxed, such a provocation didn't work anymore.

"Hahat... But, you, Hye-Rin unni, I thought you'd be too busy being lovey-dovey for today." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Joo Ji-Hyuk and Yi Hye-Rin must've been the most famous married couple in Korea right now. They were appearing on two TV shows together, and all the sweetness they poured out to each other on screen was something else to behold, really.

"Well, we can still love outside the house, right~?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

While saying something that might lead to a misunderstanding, Yi Hye-Rin leaned her head on Joo Ji-Hyuk's shoulder.

Hazeline looked at the duo with a dissatisfied expression, before

lamenting out softly.

"Anyways..... He's not coming again, is he? And I even shoved all that urgent Tower business aside to come here." (Hazeline)

Hazeline was currently reigning over the world's best Wizard Tower as its Lord.

Unlike Knights, magic still played big part in society even after reduction in the Monsters' numbers, so rather than the industry faltering away, it saw many leaps and advances forward, instead.

Well, pretty much every Wizard that was somewhat undecided between sticking to attack magic used to deal with Monsters, and the practical, everyday magic with potential to help the world, finally chose to go with the latter, that was why.

Under these changes, the Dawn & TM's Tower became widely acknowledged as the best in the world.

The thing was, the legacy of Bangbae-Dong Wizard, no, wait, no – most of the 28 grimoires he published before he left had real world applications, it turned out.

And thanks to his enormous accomplishments until the end, the name of the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong, who had vanished without a trace, had become an everlasting legend that may never be repeated again in the Wizarding world.

Bathory did complain slightly during that, though, saying all those magic spells were nothing more than some amateurish rejigging of stuff already existing in her head.

It was then, Yu Baek-Song tugged at Hazeline's robe.

"Hey, help me with my campaign funds." (Yu Baek-Song)

"....Are you insane? Why should I spend money on a cat entering politics? Besides, you've been elected already, so what gives?" (Hazeline)

"I need lots more later on. You think running a constituency is

that simple? At minimum, I gotta be elected three times." (Yu Baek-Song)

"But, isn't there still lots of time left until the election?" (Hazeline)

"I'm specially elected to fill a vacancy, so I gotta get elected again in a year, you know." (Yu Baek-Song)

Surely, the most weird prospect here belonged to Yu Baek-Song. She became a member of parliament. On top of this, her ambitions began ballooning up without anyone noticing it, and now, she could often be 'seen' staring at a certain House with Blue roof tiles with eyes burning with desire.

"Hey, how was the reaction to the interview I shot today?" (Bathory)

To the side, Bathory showed no interest in them whatsoever, and was busy asking her 'retainer' while looking at her phone.

"It's very good, ma'am. Everyone's praising you!" (Rhosrahdel)

"Heu~eung."

At Rhosrahdel's energetic reply, I could hear a slightly happy snort from the side.

It was really tough trying to predict what could've happened to Bathory and Rhosrahdel, during this past year. Well, Bathory had emerged as the clear leader/representative of the union of Vampires, after all.

At first, she alternated between the persona of the Wizard Emil and Bathory the Vampire, but after receiving a perfectly-timed image makeover at the hands of Rhosrahdel, she could appear as Bathory nowadays without an issue – she was even being seen as a goddess of peace and reconciliation, a moniker people and Vampires alike who knew the truth could never comprehend.

"There hasn't been any incidents lately, Mister Sun-Ho?" (Yu

Sae-Jung)

"Ah, well. Besides taking care of the children, nothing much's been going on in my life, miss." (Kim Sun-Ho)

As for Kim Sun-Ho.... he resigned from all of his duties and then, became a father of twins. A son and a daughter, no less.

"Mister Sun-Ho's children are so, so cute you know? Let's go and visit them sometime." (Yi Hye-Rin)

".....Yes."

I smiled relaxedly at Yi Hye-Rin's words.

And so, our unhurried conversations took flight. Waiters brought out wonderful food and expensive alcohol, and the members made sure there was no lull in our conversations.

Topics ranged from newbie members, the road ahead for TM to the succession at the Dawn, etc, etc....

But, with the exception at the very beginning, no one talked about 'him' anymore.

Everyone was being considerate to everyone else, and also, there remained this slim hope and expectation running within our group, too – where he might just show up out of the blue, that kind of hope.

And so, we talked about unimportant matters and inquired about each other's lives, letting the time slowly move forward.

One hour, then two, three, four.... time continued to flow, but no one gave up.

However, midnight came, and the day had come to an end.

The date for our regular gathering had come and gone.

And that meant, the possibility of seeing him 'today' had ended, as well.

Guild members did their best to hide their sadness, shared well

wishes and bid farewells.

I returned home feeling rather proud of myself for holding back my tears.

But once I did get home, I felt the cold emptiness of this place and I began crying again.

To not find him waiting for me at the end of a day, it was the worst torture ever.

All those things I did for him and those that I couldn't yet, stabbed my heart like an assassin's dagger.

I wanted to see his face, and repeatedly say his name out aloud.

And the fact that I couldn't do any of those without him here made it so unbearably hard.

I buried my face in the pillow and cried.

Then, I gradually fell asleep from the exhaustion.

He left as if there was nothing big going on, and disappeared as if he wasn't even there since the beginning.

But, he did exist, and even if he didn't, I still wouldn't be able to forget his face, now deeply ingrained in my heart – so, even spending one day without him was painful.

I suffered from anxiety that tomorrow wouldn't come at all.

But, I believed his promise that he'd come back no matter what.

It might not be tomorrow, but when he would make his return, I'd forgive him. No, really.

I might give him a big fat slap on the cheek, though. And then, hug him tightly, as he faltered about cutely.

I imagined the happy moments of the future and endured every day.

I endured two days like that.

Then, four days.

And so....

Spring, with flowers blooming.

Summer, when the clear winds blew.

Autumn, as the leaves on trees grew older.

And finally, after Winter, when snow blanketed the world in white...

Another year, that seemed like it would never arrive, arrived.

< 50. In the End (3) > Fin.

Chapter 173: Epilogue – Meeting Again (1)

(TL: Told from a certain someone's perspective.)

It was a typical midsummer's afternoon, with its accompanying sun blazing down – the worst type of weather, where taking only three steps would cause a bead of perspiration to trickle down one's face. The heat-infused winds and unceasing sun's rays were enough to cause a bit of resentment as well.

Underneath the clear, spotless blue sky, I wiped the beads of sweat off my face after lowering the pack of bricks to the ground.

"Oiii, Kim!!"

My break only lasted for a moment, though. The unique, roarlike voice of the foreman was ringing out loudly. There were plenty of Kims in this construction site, but I knew very well which Kim he was looking for.

"Yes, yes. I'm coming. Coming." (Kim)

I lacked enough energy to mount a serious complaint, so I just made my way to the foreman. He instructed me to move the rebars loaded onto the back of a delivery truck. I didn't say anything, simply picking up dozens of those steel beams and moved them.

A normal person might say that I used some arcane skill or displayed a superpower or something after seeing what I did, but well, guys working here didn't really seem to care anymore, as they were quite used to my antics already.

"As expected, you are really strong, aren't you, lad?"

The foreman patted my shoulder while chuckling happily. But that slight touch caused the temperature on my skin to flare up and in turn, I didn't feel so good about that.

Construction work was tough. Honestly, it was the worst. Especially during Summer, it got even worse than worst. Sweat

poured out endlessly and clung to my skin like sticky glue, while the rancid body odour got more disgusting than a blocked up sewer.

"Well, yeah, sure. I guess so~."

But, hell. What could I do? Since there was literally nothing inside my head, I might as well use this physical strength of mine like some dumb beast of burden.

"Seriously, lad. You truly have been born in a wr~ong, wrong era, man. If you were born at least 20 years earlier, then you'd have made more money than necessary to live like a king, you see."

"You mean, as a Knight?" (Kim)

"A Knight, a Mercenary, whatever."

I grinned slightly after hearing the foreman. I was satisfied by getting paid slightly more than other workers here. Plus, I didn't have such high level of power to act like a Knight or a Mercenary, anyways.

"Anyways. You still can't remember a thing?"

The foreman asked me in passing. I nodded my head.

I had no clue who I could be. Not one memory of my past prior to waking up in a hospital bed remained in my head. I got picked up by a stranger coincidentally as I floated on the waterfront of Busan, and was taken to the nearest hospital. Then, got my new identity after going through several interviews and consultations later.

If this was any old 'normal time', then my story would've been broadcast as a special circumstance or some such, but after that day, there were lots more suffering greater tribulations than me everywhere, which meant that there hadn't been any particular article written about me until now.

"What a waste. With that kind of strength, you could've done

whatever you wanted to."

"It's really not that amazing, so it's fine not to fret over it, you know." (Kim)

"I'm not talking about your strength only, but your great work ethic, too. I'm almost tempted to introduce you to my daughter, even..."

"...I'm just a construction worker, so not quite sure you should do that." (Kim)

Although I replied like that, I was kinda curious – the foreman was taking sweet his time, as if he'd pull out a photo any time, but then...

"Well, the thing is, I was just pulling your leg, you see. Hahahaha."

.....Son of a b*tch. But I still forced out a smile.

"Ha. Ha. Ha." (Kim)

"Still, out of everyone I know, you have the best physique, and not to mention that strength of yours. It's a waste to see you like this, rotting away in a construction site."

"And who in their right minds would employ a man with an uncertain background like me?" (Kim)

My face was plain, my height was average. They checked my prints but nothing showed up. I even had my iris scanned. Nothing. It was as if I didn't exist before, and suddenly popped out of nowhere into this world.

"Well, sure, but.... Ah, that's right. Why don't you apply for a job in that bodyguard place, since they are recruiting new people? You should get elected for sure, solely based on your strength alone."

"And why would I be elected, now..." (Kim)

"Five days a week, \$3000 a month."

"Oh. Do you have the pamphlets with you?"

If it's three grand for five days a week, then it was more than doable. I could do another part-time job during the weekends. But, more importantly, I was already past 25 – according to my new identity – so I couldn't stay and work at construction sites forever.

"Here."

The foreman handed me a flyer, and as I read it, a small grin crept up on my face.

"If it's five days a week for three grand, I will only be able to work on weekends, but will that be okay with you?" (Kim)

"Huhuh. It wouldn't do to block a bright future of a young man such as yourself, now would it? When you show up wearing a nice suit, don't forget to ask my daughter for her intentions, you hear?"

"There's no need. I'm pretty sure she resembles you way too much, Mister foreman..." (Kim)

"What the?! You will get a huge surprise when you see her..."

I simply chuckled and glossed over the foreman's outrage at his daughter getting involved now.

*

"This profession of personal protection service is completely different from the work of Mercenaries!! We value loyalty more than money...."

The giant hulk of a man charged with assessing the potential recruits was not assessing, but was in the middle of busy establishing militaristic discipline – through shouts, shouts and more shouts.

It must be quite effective towards other recruits, since their bodies were trembling imperceptibly, but I found it not scary at all, for some reason. No, rather than scary, it was more adorable, like watching a newborn chick tweeting or something.

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"Do you understand me?"
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Only then, the giant man nodded his head in satisfaction and continued.

"First of all, do not mistakenly believe that having a good physique is all you need to become a top bodyguard. Let me demonstrate. Oii, you."

The man pointed at me. Meaning, the demonstration would involve me, so I couldn't tell whether it was me or him enjoying the wickedness of rotten luck today.

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"Sir." (Kim)
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I stepped forward as instructed. And then, ran towards his side as ordered, too. As soon as I made contact, he grabbed my waist and tried to lift me up, but....

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"Uh?! Euh-ah-ahck!!"
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Maybe, this was what they were referring to as 'muscle memory'. I picked up the entire body of the recruit assessment guy and slammed him down to the ground.

Kwahng!!

The dude remained sprawled on the floor unconscious, his eyes slack. And there was thick silence descending on the place.

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"Huh...."
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[&]quot;Yes sir!"

[&]quot;I can't hear you!!"

[&]quot;Yeeeees sir!!!!"

[&]quot;Step forward."

[&]quot;.....Sir." (Kim)

[&]quot;Come at me."

[&]quot;That's crazy..."

This guy must've been the top hidden 'ace' of this company, because other employees who came around to check out the assessment couldn't stop their jaws from hitting the floor.

And that was how I got successfully hired as a temp.

*

That 'five days a week, three grand a month' thing was a total hogwash. I worked for a full month without a day off and ran around like crazy, yet the pay was only around \$2200. It was far lower than I'd like, but then, the work itself was fun, so I decided to stick around for a bit.

Another reason was that, I seemed to possess a really sturdy body, which meant I didn't need a lot of sleep and didn't fall ill at all, either.

There was a time when I 'protected' a politician from a thrown egg; then, there was that time when I stopped someone from trying to invade the stage where an event was taking place; hell, I even chased away the so-called biggest fan – read stalker – of a certain girl group that other time as well.

The most important bit was me saving the girl group.

Right after that happened, one of the singers asked me for my number, making me wonder whether this was a dream or reality. Not sure what she saw in me, but she then asked me if I'd like to become her 'manager'. Her name was 'Yu-Ah', by the way. A very pretty girl, too.

"Not interested. Besides..." (Kim)

"I asked the director, and we can offer you three and a half grand a month." (Yu-Ah)

"....Why is the salary of a manager that high?" (Kim)

"Well~, because, I'm sure you'll do a great job, and also, I asked the director really nicely, you know?" (Yu-Ah)

I was wondering how could a girl group that was just beginning to get noticed, carry any clout, but her next words stopped my thought train.

"And, the director is my uncle, too." (Yu-Ah)

Well, in that case, I should grab hold onto this meal ticket, then.

"I was planning to resign soon, anyways. Oh well. Even if I run around for a year, my pay would freeze around at 2.5k, so if I consider my age... You know this too, don't you? Stories about guys like me." (Kim)

"How old are you?" (Yu-Ah)

"....Eh?"

"Your age." (Yu-Ah)

I couldn't recall it after getting asked out of the blue, so I whipped out the wallet and checked it again.

"I'm 25." (Kim)

"Fut. Why are you checking out your own age?" (Yu-Ah)

I chuckled and made some stuff up on the spot.

*

And well, two years passed by after I switched my job from being a bodyguard to a manager of this girl group.

Of course, it wasn't as if I was rubbish at my new job. It seemed that I was an excellent driver in my past, because as soon as I got my licence, I ended up morphing into the best driver in the company, enough to astound everyone else. Also, my luck was pretty good as well, since all the appearance deals on TV shows I brought in turned out to be massive successes as well.

Thanks to that, I got a promotion and became a head of the department while still staying as the group's manager.

The work remained crazy busy, but what with the increase in

salary, I finally got to enjoy a pretty good lifestyle now.

"Oppa. Don't you wanna go to a party with me today?" (Yu-Ah)

It was on a certain day.

As we made our way back home after recording Yu-Ah's solo album launch, she suddenly asked me while her cheeks dyed in slight red.

"What party are you talking about now?" (Kim)

"There is a really important party happening today, you know? I got lucky, and scored an invite for that." (Yu-Ah)

"Okay, what is it?" (Kim)

"It's the birthday party for Yu Sae-Jung unni." (Yu-Ah)

".....Yu Sae-Jung?" (Kim)

The name sounded somewhat familiar. No wait – if that name didn't sound familiar, then I shouldn't even be a human being. She was the most famous woman in Korea, after all.

As if she was really looking forward to this, Yu-Ah's eyes were shining ever so brightly.

"Ng. You know, right? I did that show not too long ago, remember? I heard there will be a birthday party so I asked if I could come and she gave me an invite! Plus, I got another one, too! Well? You will go with me, right, Oppa?" (Yu-Ah)

"...Hmm."

I pretended to be in a dilemma, but well, I had made up my mind already.

"Since you asked me, yeah, I will." (Kim)

I smiled at Yu-Ah adorably throwing up a fuss and pressed on the accelerator.

(TL: Back to the third person perspective.)

Aboard the so-called pride of TM, the cruiseliner, a big party was in the full swing of things. From the spectacular spotlights to various delicacies flown from all around the world, from the high-class music playing in the background to the smartly-dressed waiters – this party, where all the attending guests couldn't stop praising it, was prepared for the sake of just one person.

And that was Yu Sae-Jung, the future inheritor of the Dawn conglomerate, as well as the director of the Dawn & TM's Wizard Tower.

She was exactly the type of woman possessing the social clout and financial muscle to hold such a birthday party, that's for sure.

"Well now, our Sae-Jung will soon become thirty, won't she?" (Hazeline)

"Wow. You're so right." (Yu Sae-Jung)

After hearing Hazeline speak up, Yu Sae-Jung feigned shock and lightly clapped her hands. Yu Baek-Song quickly dug in between the gap created.

"And you will soon turn forty." (Yu Baek-Song)

At this unexpected low blow, Hazeline's brows furrowed slightly.

"...But you're also forty, aren't you?" (Hazeline)

"It's not, when counted in Soo-in years." (Yu Baek-Song)

"In that case, I'm also not." (Hazeline)

"But Elves can't live for long, right?" (Yu Baek-Song)

"I can live past 120 with no issues." (Hazeline)

An average lifespan for an Elf was 1.5 times longer than a human's. And befitting the reputation as the race of beauties, the aging process of Elves was far, far less severe than a human's, even when hanging on by the death's doorstep. It was not for nothing

that there was a joke about an Elf with wrinkles being a few days away from dying.

"Whatcha gonna do about it, Miss 40?" (Yu Baek-Song)

".....Yapping on and on, you're being noisy, little kitty." (Hazeline)

Yu Baek-Song and Hazeline glared at each other and started a psychological warfare.

However, their abrasive and childish tit-for-tat looked like an awesome high-level conference full of important discussions to the observers from afar.

"If we are to talk about ages, then the biggest problem is with our Captain, Miss Yu-Rin. Her age isn't all that different from Hazeline Unni, and she's neither an Elf nor a Soo-in, on top of that." (Yi Hye-Rin)

Yi Hye-Rin giggled ominously and dragged in Kim Yu-Rin into this conversation, who just so happened to be busy chugging down lots of food on the side. Of course, Kim Yu-Rin got surprised by the inclusion, and coughed while patting her chest as if the food went down the wrong hole.

".....Cough. W, why are you talking about me all of a sudden, now?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Because, we're worried about you. Maybe not marriage, but how about going on a date with someone? You're only getting older, you know." (Yi Hye-Rin)

Unhappy but having nothing to retort with, all Kim Yu-Rin could do was to wordlessly glare at Yi Hye-Rin. It was then, Joo Ji-Hyuk cleared his throat a bit and intervened.

"Well, it should be fine, since Miss Yu-Rin is still very beautiful." (Joo Ji-Hyuk)

".....What the heck? Listen here, just whose husband are you?"

(Yi Hye-Rin)

"No, I'm just saying..." (Joo Ji-Hyuk)

"How many times did I tell you not to look at other women besides me?!" (Yi Hye-Rin)

Yi Hye-Rin pinched both of Joo Ji-Hyuk's cheeks and fixed his head towards her direction.

Yu Sae-Jung gazed at the two of them and recalled the happy yet sorrowful past. Then, for some inexplicable reason, she felt this sense of familiarity and turned her head around.

And there was a man standing there, who seemed quite familiar to her. That man was looking around with a pair of dumbfounded eyes, as if this was his first time attending a party like this one.

Seemingly entranced by something, Yu Sae-Jung's feet moved on their own.

And soon after, as she got close enough to touch him.

"Oppa~." (Yu-Ah)

Someone else appeared and took away his hand. Startled, Yu Sae-Jung took a couple of steps back. And the two people ended up discovering her presence because of that.

"Ah, Sae-Jung Unni!" (Yu-Ah)

The woman greeted her happily. And the man who resembled 'him' so much, lightly bowed his head.

"Uh, uh...." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Is there something wrong?" (Yu-Ah)

"N, no. It's nothing. Just...." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Oh my? You're suddenly using formal speech...." (Yu-Ah)

Unfortunately, Yu Sae-Jung couldn't even utter out a single question before hastily retreating to a far away distance from them.

< Epilogue: Meeting Again (1) > Fin.

Chapter 174: Epilogue – Meeting Again (2)

(TL: Told from Yu Sae-Jung's perspective.)

His height and even the face, as well as the 'atmosphere' of the person were different from Kim Sae-Jin, although there were also some similar points as well.

However, he did say his physique and facial appearance had changed a good deal due to his Trait's effects. Truly, the first impression of his face I got, which was getting very faint in my memories nowadays, did gradually change as the days went by.

Right. The unexplainable mystery called Trait had disappeared from this world, hadn't it?

Of course, just because Traits had disappeared, that didn't equate to everything built up by them also disappearing as well. The clear example of this was my own body, changed with my Trait's help.

But, no matter how hard I thought about it, that man's face was remarkably similar to Kim Sae-Jin's 'first impression' still faintly remaining in my mind. It might be nothing more than my baseless hope cooking up some nonsense, but he just felt way too familiar to me.

It was then, Yi Hye-Rin was asking me with her head tilting slightly.

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"Sae-Jung?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

"Ah, yes?"

"What are you looking at?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

"I.... It's nothing, really...."
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I couldn't concentrate on the party anymore. I tried to lighten up the air around me, but I kept on glancing back towards where he was. Watching him smile brightly while looking at another woman made my chest tighten. All these men approaching me with smiles were getting annoying now. Even the wonderful tunes beautifully draping over the party was getting on my nerves, too.

In the end, I had to make up my mind. Except, I couldn't muster up enough courage, so I poured the whole glass of champagne down the throat. Even that wasn't enough, so I downed another one. And then, another.

People around me were showing confusion at my sudden drinking spree, but I didn't care.

After all, the only existence that mattered to me right now was that man.

*

(TL: Back to third person perspective.)

"Oppa. Did something happen with Yu Sae-Jung Unni somehow?" (Yu-Ah)

Yu-Ah ended up questioning the manager. She could no longer ignore Yu Sae-Jung continuously glancing at her direction.

However, the manager, Kim Yun-Jeh, simply shook his head disinterestedly.

"No, nothing happened. First time meeting her today." (Kim Yun-Jeh)

Of course, Yu-Ah didn't find this easy to accept. How could she be convinced that there had been no incident of any kind, when Yu Sae-Jung was repeatedly glancing over at their direction for some time now? Obviously, one of them did something wrong here....

"Maybe you did something wrong?" (Yu-Ah)

"I'm telling you, there's nothing.... Ah. Was it because me only nodding my head once when greeting her just now?" (Kim Yun-Jeh)

"Ah?! You only nodded once? That's so arrogant, you know!"

(Yu-Ah)

Yu-Ah jumped up in surprise and tugged at Kim Yun-Jeh's arm even harder.

Almost instantly, Yu Sae-Jung's stares became sharper by a level. It even felt like her stares were stabbing into their skin.

"Okay then – what should I have done? Bend over backwards 90 degrees or something?" (Kim Yun-Jeh)

"No, hang on.... maybe not 90, but you could've done a 60 instead, you know!" (Yu-Ah)

"Oh, really?No, wait minute here. I'm sure Yu Sae-Jung isn't such a narrow-minded woman." (Kim Yun-Jeh)

"H, hey?! Look at this guy here, blurting out whatever he wants...!!" (Yu-Ah)

Yu-Ah hurriedly covered up his mouth. And then, worried about being overheard, she quickly surveyed the surroundings.

"Euh-urck."

And as expected, Yu Sae-Jung was glaring with terrifying eyes at her direction – heck, with teeth gritting, no less.

"....Let's just get out of here first." (Yu-Ah)

"What? But why?" (Kim Yun-Jeh)

"I can't afford to lose Oppa just yet." (Yu-Ah)

"No, hang on. What are you even on about...." (Kim Yun-Jeh)

In the end, Yu-Ah dragged Kim Yun-Jeh and hurriedly ran out from the party venue.

".....Ah."

Yu Sae-Jung could do nothing but to helplessly chase after the departing backs of the duo with her eyes. And there she was, hoping that drinking four more glasses of the bubbly stuff would finally give her the necessary courage, too.

"Ha-ah...."

She spat out a long sigh, while resenting her aching innards that didn't want her to get drunk at all.

*

That night.

Escaping from the party venue alone, Yu Sae-Jung went to find Lillia with a resolute determination. She could no longer endure it anymore.

She had been waiting until now, fearing that if she learned of his passing, then the last strand of hope she'd been carrying around all this time might be gone too. But then, she encountered a man who resembled Kim Sae-Jin so, so much tonight. So, how could she be expected to remain calm now?

Lillia found it very difficult to deal with Yu Sae-Jung and her determination.

Although she knew the details, Lillia kept mum because she thought she was following Kim Sae-Jin's will. But even she decided to break the silence after listening to Yu Sae-Jung's tearful recount of the earlier encounter.

Because, Lillia became even more convinced that he indeed got 'saved by the Earth' from Yu Sae-Jung's testimony.

So, Lillia told her everything, leaving nothing out.

All the 'worlds' he had to live through, all the weight of pain and suffering he was burdened with and had to endure, in order to protect everyone, and even the reason that made all of that possible.

Pressured by the enormous truth of the matter, which was more than enough to refer him as a saintly figure, Yu Sae-Jung felt like being crushed to the floor, and she couldn't even utter a single word out. "If that man was really Mister Sae-Jin, then it's most likely that the planet has given its thanks and rewarded him. Not only taking away his Trait, but also his memory as well, allowing him to live happily like an ordinary person." (Lillia)

Lillia also tried to search for Sae-Jin's whereabouts on her own as well. But, according to the reports of the intelligence operatives, they couldn't find anyone resembling him. However, the story changed if he reverted back to his old appearance before the Trait manifested, just as Yu Sae-Jung had posited.

No, it was still too early to discard the possibility that the Earth created a brand new body and revived him.

"In that case, what should we do? What if he really is Kim Sae-Jin? I...." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Even if that person really turns out to be Mister Sae-Jin, and even if he's not... It'll be very difficult." (Lillia)

"No, what the hell are you saying? Are those words or farts? Please, speak properly so I can understand you!" (Yu Sae-Jung)

Yu Sae-Jung just couldn't maintain her calm, and Lillia could only look at her with pitying eyes, before carrying on.

"If he's not Mister Sae-Jin, then that's that, but if he is, then that presents a lot of problems. If a person who had been living for 600 years regains his memories, do you honestly believe he'd be able to maintain the same personality anymore? Also, in his previous life, his entire being evolved into the legendary Bahamut. In other words, he had become a being that's no different from an actual deity." (Lillia)

Lillia then added, wouldn't we look like ants to him once he regains his memories?

Yu Sae-Jung couldn't reply. She wanted to argue about something nonsensical, sure. But her throat had clammed up and she couldn't summon up her own voice anymore.

Her head was full of stinging pain, causing her to think that this truly unbelievable story sounded far more real than reality, all the while Lillia's words stabbing into her heart was making her scared. Terrified.

Finally, she couldn't withstand the tide of emotions wanting to drown her and plopped down on the floor. And then, for a long time she cried while emitting pained moans.

(TL: Back to Yu Sae-Jung's perspective.)

August 19.

At first, I was full of despair. However, I somehow regained enough of my senses and observed him for a long time. It felt like a year had passed, but in reality, it was only for a month.

If someone saw my obsessed behaviour, I'd be labelled as a stalker, but every passing day felt like blood was draining from me, so I couldn't help it.

Every night when I fell asleep, I dreamed a dream and a nightmare at the same time, the former about him coming back and smiling at me like how he did before, and the latter about losing him to a girl named Yu-Ah before he could regain his memories.

And today – I could no longer endure this torture and had decided to proactively try something. That was today.

I requested Mister Hahn-Sung to schedule a private meeting with the man. This was possible because he worked in the entertainment industry, while I was the majority shareholder of The Monster Entertainment.

August 19, 17:47.

Only 13 minutes remained until six in the evening, the scheduled hour for our meeting.

I soothed my nervousness by chewing on my nails, and I resolved my worries, albeit only by a small amount, with my legs trembling all the time.

And as the phone's screen indicated 18:00...

The door to my office was pushed open.

Stunned silly, I shot right up before I even realised it.

"Hello, there." (Kim Yun-Jeh)

"Ah, yes, h, helloooOOOW!!"

Oops, I got too loud there, didn't I? My consciousness dimmed for a bit thanks to that stupid mistake of mine. But, I couldn't black out here, no matter what.... I desperately held on and pointed at the couch.

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"…?"
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"P, please have a seat. Hurry." (Yu Sae-Jung)

He tilted his head slightly, but still managed to sit down. Soon enough, a silence descended in the office for the next three seconds, but as I couldn't endure it, I hastily walked over to the desk where tea and snacks had been arranged.

"Would you like some tea?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Eh? No, I'm...."

"Drink." (Yu Sae-Jung)

I obstinately put the tea cup down on the coffee table. I couldn't help it – my heart was beating so wildly, it was nigh-on impossible to act normally right now.

"Oh... uh, sure." (Kim Yun-Jeh)

I carefully studied the way he glanced at the tea and the prepared refreshments. The cold sweat slowly pooling behind my neck began dripping down my backside.

Actually, this arrangement was a ruse to try and discern the

truth.

A person's habits ingrained into one's body would never change, even if he had lost all his memories. And I could remember all of his habits clearly, since I had lived with him for a such long time....

And in that moment, electricity zapped my back.

The way he held the tea cup, the way he ate refreshments...

I was sure now.

This man here, he was Kim Sae-Jin.

"May I ask for your name again?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

".....My name is Kim Yun-Jeh."

Of course, the name was different. But, this man was, without a doubt, Kim Sae-Jin. That sitting posture, his waist slightly turned away when facing me; that habit of rubbing the left thumbnail when nervous; even the actions of sweeping his hair away.

Seeing him like this, I got buoyed by my emotions and ended up asking him an unexpected question.

"Don't you recognise me?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Eh?"

His face showed how confused he was. He looked so adorable then, I was tempted to embrace him tightly. But I knew better than anyone that I should not do that.

"Don't you recognise me? Me, I'm Yu Sae-Jung."

".....Ahh. Of course, I recognise you. I've seen you on TV quite often." (Kim Yun-Jeh)

"....Besides that?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

My sights were blurring. Seemed like tears were blocking up my view but I couldn't wipe them away. I lost all strength in my arms, that was why.

Afterwards, it was like several screws came loose in my head. I couldn't remember what we talked about at all. I could only suspect that I might have tearfully repeated the question 'don't you recognise me' over and over like a mad fool.

Whatever the case might have been, when I came to, he was no longer in the office. That felt even worse than before, and I ended up crying alone. I really sobbed at the top of my lungs.

*

(TL: Told from the third person perspective. C'mon, Author, just stick with one perspective for the whole chapter already!!!!)

With a swollen pair of eyes, Yu Sae-Jung called for an urgent meeting of The Monster Guild members. Well, the only people she could openly discuss this matter was with other Guild members, after all.

"What a complicated situation this is.... So, you're really sure that guy is Mister Sae-Jin?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

"Yes, I'm almost definitely sure. Well, I still need to look up what had happened here, though." (Yu Sae-Jung)

At Kim Yu-Rin's question, Yu Sae-Jung replied in a calm manner. It was as if she had regained some peace of mind after sobbing her eyes out.

"Okay, so? What's the problem? You just have to go at it nonstop, no? I mean, Sae-Jung-ah, you can pretty much seduce any guy if you wanted to, right? So, you wrap him around your fingers first and be in love together, whatever, then wouldn't his memories slowly return in time?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

Yi Hye-Rin's solution was the most brilliant one considering the situation. However, the sole problem with this suggestion was that it wasn't only Yu Sae-Jung who had realised something important from it.

"Uh...."

Both Kim Yu-Rin and Hazeline carried serious expressions as if deep in thought and meaningfully rubbed their chins.

Seeing this, Yu Sae-Jung hastily pounded on the table. Her entire body trembled from the shock of this sudden betrayal.

"You guys better not think of something funny. I'm warning you!!" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"W, why are you saying I'm thinking of funny things now...?" (Hazeline)

Hazeline sneakily avoided Yu Sae-Jung's gaze and pulled out her phone. Since this action was very suspicious, Yu Sae-Jung quickly snatched it away.

"I was just thinking about how to restore Mister Sae-Jin's memories, that's all." (Kim Yu-Rin)

Even though Kim Yu-Rin spoke thus, there were droplets of perspiration clearly visible on the back of her hands.

" "

Yu Sae-Jung frowned deeply and glared at them.

It was then.

"Hey, everyone, I found him!!!"

Bathory literally kicked the door down and entered the venue.

"I said, I found him!!!" (Bathory)

"....What the heck."

As soon as the gazes gathered on her, Bathory triumphantly declared to everyone present.

"I just so happened to catch a Mah-in with a funny ability, you see? This b*stard can sense the flow of Mana signature even if it's gone out of our dimension...." (Bathory)

"Oh, you mean Kim Yun-Jeh? The man working as a manager at the 'Rochen' Entertainment?"

Suddenly, Bathory's face froze up like a stone statue.

".....And just how the hell you idiots know that?" (Bathory)

Everyone gathered in the conference room giggled softly, while Yu Sae-Jung approached and gently held Bathory's hand.

"Thank you, for the confirmation." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Kim Yun-Jeh was on his way back from the convenience store after buying a Western-style takeaway, then his steps came to a halt after seeing many stuffs belonging to a new tenant moving in piled up on the apartment parking lot.

For some reason, quite a few unbelievable people started becoming his neighbours lately. He had no idea why, but Hazeline and Kim Yu-Rin, Joo Ji-Hyuk and Yi Hye-Rin, Kim Sun-Ho and Rhosrahdel, as well as other members of The Monster had moved into this apartment building.

Of course, he wasn't discontent or some c**p like that. Actually, he was really happy at the fact that the price of the place he bought with borrowed money had shot up through the roof, and that he was sitting on the proverbial gold mine as a result. That was why he could carry a huge grin everyday.

Kim Yun-Jeh stared at the tall height of the stuff belonging to the new tenant, and eventually, his eyes met the blue sky above.

The blue Summer sky with not one cloud on sight, it sure looked pretty.

And to think, such a clear sky was covered in darkness and on the brink of apocalypse a few years ago, or so he heard.

"To protect that sky, the Bahamut had sacrificed itself, you know."

It was then, a rather sexy voice tickled his earbuds.

He turned around to find Yu Sae-Jung. Only then, he remembered that she too had moved to this apartment as well. The media was shouting about her presence being the 'finishing touch' or some such.

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"The Bahamut, you say?" (Kim Yun-Jeh)
"Yes." (Yu Sae-Jung)
".....Ha, haha..." (Kim Yun-Jeh)
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Kim Yun-Jeh just chuckled. Well, he couldn't remember any of that, anyways. He probably did see it back then, no, without a doubt, he lost his memory after getting entangled in that somehow, and now, the inside of his head was as empty as a sheet of blank paper. It was such a frustrating and rather lonely feeling, this.

Yu Sae-Jung carefully approached him as he chuckled bitterly to himself.

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"Mister Yun-Jeh, do you live around here?" (Yu Sae-Jung)
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"Oh, uh, yes, I do." (Kim Yun-Jeh)

"What a coincidence, then. I just moved here, too." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Yu Sae-Jung pointed at the stuff behind her and grinned refreshingly.

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"....Oh, really?" (Kim Yun-Jeh)
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"Yes, really."

While seeing Kim Yun-Jeh's uninterested eyes looking back at her – no, seeing Kim Sae-Jin like that, she firmly resolved herself once more.

And that was – even if he had lost all the memories created with her and thus no longer was Kim Sae-Jin, she would still not give up. She would do anything possible to get him back. No matter what.

And so, for her very first operation (?) today, she even resorted to borrowing the power of "mother". With the justification that the mother was to be her in-law soon enough, she searched around and finally located a certain charnel house, and located the only photo the mother-in-law and the 'husband' took together all those years ago.

"H, hmm."

While apologising furiously inside her mind, Yu Sae-Jung walked past him and dropped the photoframe 'accidentally'. Hearing the thud, her chest jumped a bit, hoping that the glass didn't shatter from the fall.

And as she pretended to not notice for the next three seconds or so, he started talking to her first, as planned.

"Excuse me, this...." (Kim Yun-Jeh)

He picked the photoframe off the ground and stared at it for a long time.

At that very moment, her heart stopped beating. Please, please...

However, the meaningful glint in his eyes only lasted for a short while. He just tilted his head slightly and handed over the frame to her.

But Yu Sae-Jung was satisfied by this. The signs of confusion and deja vu written large on his face for a brief moment, those were enough. The possibility definitely existed now.

"....Looks like you were heading in as well? Would you like to accompany me along the way?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Yes? Ah, sure." (Kim Yun-Jeh)

He nodded his head.

Although it was only ten seconds from there to the elevator, she still felt unbelievably happy inside.

She even wanted to hold his hand, but decided not to get too greedy. Just walk alongside, for now.

"By the way, is it okay to leave your stuff back there like that?" (Kim Yun-Jeh)

"Yep."

Hearing him, Yu Sae-Jung pointed at the photoframe, or more correctly, a boy smiling inside the photo.

"I only... need this one, you see." (Yu Sae-Jung)

It didn't matter to her even if he had no memories of the past.

In that case, all she had to do was to create new, fun memories with him, and to replace the old one that was filled with only the lonesome, endless waiting.

Although her efforts might be cheaper and worth nothing compared to what he had experienced, she was still prepared to wait and pour every fibre of her being to make her resolutions a reality.

"See you around~." (Yu Sae-Jung)

"....Ah, sure thing." (Kim Yun-Jeh)

She stared at the side of his face somewhat shyly while her fists clenched tightly.

She wasn't worried, nor did she feel scared. No, she simply imagined the bright future with him once more and smiled.

The sky had cleared up wonderfully now.

And surely, the brightly smiling sun floating in that blue clarity would continue to shine with warmth on them, hopefully without the darkness trying to dye the world again.

And after some time would flow by...

'Someday, that happiness we've been wishing for will be ours.'

Yu Sae-Jung gazed at him, and smiled radiantly like the sun.

< Epilogue: Meeting Again (2) > Fin.

[The author, Jee Gab Song's postscript]

Everyone, thank you for reading until the end. I love you, my readers. Even to my own belief, all my words seemed really lacking, but still.... I can only thank you again and again.

While writing this, I had a few regrets and felt bad about missed chances. Since I lacked the gift of gab, I can't seem to explain myself properly, so...

To summarise in three sentences:

Even though this work was lacking, regretful and somewhat incomplete even from the author's point of view, I still like to thank every one of you for reading it regardless. I'm sure there were times when you thought you didn't get your money's worth – you have endured well.

I'd like to return with even better work next time!

Everyone, I'll see you all later. Goodbye!

[The translator's take]

What can I say, other than to repeat what the author wrote above mine – thank you, everyone, for sticking with this novel through thick and thin, through all the infuriating arcs and genuinely cool moments.

This was my first attempt at fan translating a novel, and in the process, I have learned a lot. I will always be grateful for that.

Also, I'd like to specifically mention the excellent work put in by my editor, akshaythedon. He's my partner in crime for this adventure. Although he told me he would stop editing after the conclusion of this novel, I still wish for him all the best in the world.

Oh, before I forget, Mister Author, I'd like to also thank you for infuriating me with many, many weird turn of phrases and inconceivable Hanja combinations that basically didn't have any meaning peppered throughout this novel. Digging through internet trying to find out what you were trying to convey was really not fun and time consuming, you know!!!

And finally, once more, thank you guys and girls for taking your valuable time out to choose & read this novel, as well as all those incredibly generous and wonderful folks who had donated and sponsored countless chapters during the TL run. There are so many names, I can't even begin to write all of them down, otherwise you might end up reading until the end of next year! LOL. Regardless, you guys totally rock.

My next project(s) will be.... well, watch this space, folks. It's going to be a doozy.

A_Passing_Wanderer, signing out.

[The editor's rant]

Heya, people! I am akshaythedon, the editor of this novel. It has been a crazy roller-coaster ride for me with this novel. At first, I actually started having some interaction with the TL A_Passing_Wanderer when I was reading his original. Then, by some inexplicable forces, I ended up helping out with this fan translation as an editor. And forgive me if I had not made the novel as readable as you guys would have expected.

I still remember the days where we did a mass release and Wand and I would end up doing some work overtime, despite our regular schedules. It seems surreal for the novel to have been completed (even though it is a small one). Unfortunately, I won't be able to continue my tryst with Wand as I am stuck in a transition phase in real life. (You know, job and the risk of being an unemployed.)

Hopefully, Wand would get another editor, better than me if possible, for the novel(s) he would be translating and for the original that he would continue working on later.

And finally, I would like to thank the author for writing a reasonable story that could be enjoyed by the audience. I hope he could continue producing novels better than 'A Monster Who Levels Up'.

For all the readers, continue your habit of reading these novels, so that more fan translations would pop up and who knows, some great gems could be unearthed from this vast world of novels.

Okay, I guess I have rambled too much... Thank you for reading the novel once again.

This is akshaythedon, signing out.

Alternate Ending

Lisa's Notes: The author's ending is a bittersweet one. It brings somewhat of a closure to the story in general, but it leaves a bitter pill on what happens to the characters, especially the MC. This alternate story is my own take on what could happen in the end. Enjoy!

When Kim Sae-Jin announced to the world that a terrible calamity will befall on Earth, it was met with harsh criticism from the masses, but despite all that, the governments of the world still prepare for the inevitability of the calamity.

The day the monster outbreak happened, every country dispatched its military, knights, and wizards to the frontline.

But even then, no one could have prepared them of the terrifying reality that is happening.

Billions of people dazedly looked on at the horrifying existence standing tall – some through their naked eyes, while others, through the airwaves.

Funnily enough, even with the absolutely terrifying and unimaginable threat standing right in front, not one cliched occasion of some nutter proclaiming the end of the world could be seen. No incidents of robbery, violence, rape, etc, etc, happened, either.

Everyone simply stared at the creature with eyes completely lost within the pits of despair – the being that just stood there, not affected in the slightest by the combined might of the military, Knights, and Wizards, with not one person able to tell what it was planning to do.

[It has been now confirmed via the testimony of the first generation migrants, that the being on screen is called the 'Dimensional Devourer'. Although it is one level lower in terms of danger compared to the 'Universe Devourer', we have learned that this creature has destroyed countless worlds already.]

Even under this kind of situation, the news channels faithfully carried out their duties.

However, this piece of information delivered with such desperation ended up sounding like a horrifying eulogy to all those stationed at the battlefront.

"What's the current situation? Do we have enough leeway to pour all our attacks on that b*stard?" (Kim Hyun-Seok)

The supreme commander of the gathered forces, Kim Hyun-Seok, asked a junior Knight, while his body was covered from head to toe in unidentified blood and dirt.

"We are at the very limit of our capacity trying to deal with the new Monsters emerging from the Fissure, as well as existing Monsters running amok under that b*stard's influences, sir!"

".....D*mn it." (Kim Hyun-Seok)

Kim Hyun-Seok spat out a low groan. He never expected something like this. They thoroughly planned for Boss Monsters and the mobs, but they never imagined a single entity, capable of desroying the world. The only things they could do right now, were to quell the rampaging Monsters, or simply observe that damnable 'Devourer'.

But, even doing that wasn't easy.

The battalion of soldiers desperately guarding the frontlines with all their might got destroyed with a single swing of the giant creature's fist, and more than half of the gathered Knights seemed to have lost their dang collective minds after witnessing that incredible display of power.

Not to mention, the mental and physical strain of the troops fighting for the past five days straight without a break or sleep were taking their toll as well. Kim Hyun-Seok even saw several soldiers deserting their posts and running away.

He couldn't imagine a situation worse than this one.

"...We still need to hold the line." (Kim Hyun-Seok)

Of course, Kim Hyun-Seok could not give up here. Knights, as well as the military, were the citizens' so-called psychological 'Maginot' line. So, if he and his men were to retreat from here, then the country, even the entire world, wouldn't be able to survive. No, he couldn't back away from here, even if it was only to repay the faith and love people had shown them until now.

"Yes, sir. Understood."

The subordinate Knight nodded his head and took his leave.

Kim Hyun-Seok grasped his sword tightly and glared at the giant creature that he couldn't still take in its entirety even with his neck tilted way back.

This was the only thing he could do for now.

For the first time in his life, he could truly feel the inadequacy of his powers.

It was now noon, yet the sun was still blocked by the jet-black clouds, and very little light was coming through.

And, just as the Korea's best Knight stared at the heavens and lamented the fact that he couldn't do anything...

Something that could only be described as quite bizarre happened.

"....What the hell is that?"

The 'beginning' was nothing more than someone murmuring out in a daze. That was all. No one paid him any mind. However, this person didn't let it go, and poked the Knight next to him with an elbow. The poked Knight was way too tired to even get annoyed, so he had to endure the abuse for a bit of time, before finally turning his gaze towards the direction his pokey friend was pointing at.

And then, he ended up doing the exact same poking thing with another Knight next to him.

That was how the eyes of the Knights gradually rose up to the sky, one by one.

With enough time passing by, the need to poke others with elbows had dissipated, and in the end, even camera lenses were taking in the sights of the emergence... of a new unknown being.

From within the beating, swirling storm of winds that seemed to rip apart those murky, dark clouds, a mystical creature slowly revealed itself.

Spreading out its noble and pure blue-coloured wings widely, its deep yet dignified eyes looked down on the world below, and its powerful and resolutely-shut maws pointed towards the Dimensional Devourer.

Knights, soldiers, even normal people couldn't even begin to fathom the identity of that creature.

However, strangely enough, they all could faintly guess what it could be.

That creature was an exact copy of the dragon in the fairytales and legends of the yore.

"What the...."

Just before the gathered Knights could fall into a collective dilemma of choosing between whether to celebrate this new development, or to throw away even the last vestige of hope – the dragon-like being lunged at the still-awakening Devourer.

The world got twisted apart momentarily from the air pressure and noise generated by that powerful, mad rush forward.

Needing only a blink of an eye that felt like the flow of time had been distorted, the dragon arrived by the side of the Devourer and wrapped the tail around it – then, began gathering a massive amount of Mana in the mouth.

And the Devourer, until now inert and simply observing, hurriedly moved its arms and grabbed the dragon's – Bahamut's – tail.

Too bad, it was one step too late.

A jet-black Breath beam was fired out without special sound effects and blew away the Devourer's head.

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"What....?"
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"Huh....."

And there they were, unable to damage the Devourer no matter what they tried – jaws of the gathered Knights dropped to the floor, after witnessing the empty spot where the giant creature's head should have been.

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However, the Devourer wasn't dead. Although now headless, it moved its one arm and two legs to fiercely resist.

That was the signal for the mighty physical struggle between these two titans that shook the entire world.

An indescribable scene of battle unfolded, where fists and front claws, kicks and tail whips were exchanged endlessly.

However, after losing its head, the Devourer had lost its sense of sight and all it could do was flail its arms and legs about wildly.

Of course, those simple actions alone possessed incredible danger. Sae-Jin had found it difficult to properly control his new wings and was helpless when he got punched by a blind swing and flew away. Then, he even got kicked in the stomach, as well.

Only after he spat out black blood out, he decided to deal with

this b*stard using magic.

Still, the Devourer proved to be not a simple opponent at all. As soon as it sensed the activation of magic, it too responded with magic of its own. The only difference was, the Devourer's did not just aim at the dragon only.

It was targeting the entire world. The sole purpose was to destroy.

Bahamut hurriedly fired off a Breath. In the end, though – Sae-Jin returned to fighting it physically, in order to prevent the fountain of blood from the Devourer's destroyed arm landing on the ground below. To stop it from using magic ever again, he hit it even harder than before.

But, well, from the very beginning of this battle, there could only be one destined victor between the headless Dimensional Devourer and Bahamut with all its body parts still intact.

The longer the fight dragged on, the Devourer's ability to make judgments suffered, and in the end, it threw its arms and legs wildly as if it had forgotten how to use magic completely. That only lasted until another Breath from Bahamut pierced its heart.

....And so, the Dimensional Devourer that seemingly possessed no equal in this world, fell while issuing a bizarre cry that sounded like an animal, and scattered away into black smoke.

Only the silence remained afterwards.

Not even screams, cheers, loud shouts, or praises could be heard.

This remained true even for the reporters broadcasting the event live, the anchors relaying it to the ordinary people, as well as those said people watching on.

This silence was so suffocating and unreal that tens of thousands souls gathered here ended up imagining this was all just a long and harsh nightmare instead. Within this stillness, Bahamut slowly flew away.

While blood poured out from numerous wounds on his body, the dragon desperately flew towards the East Sea where he would be healed.

Only after he had drifted away eastward, and after a considerable length of time went by, did the remaining army of fighters realise what had just happened.

One by one, they began approaching the position where the Devourer used to stand with numb and dazed minds.

With the exception of giant craters where the Devourer's massive feet stepped on, there really was no trace of the Monster itself.

The reality finally dawned on them and they stared up at the heavens above.

Just in time, the dark clouds drifted away and several bright rays of sun shone brilliantly down on the ground.

And so, the world would never forget the beauty of the sunlight seen for the first time in five days.

Despite the horrible wounds inflicted during the battle of the Dimensional Devourer, Kim Sae-Jin, as Bahamut, instinctively returned to the place of his slumber in the depths of the sea. The ocean's vast pool of mana serves as the catalyst on his recuperation. Despite that, the battle has taken quite a toll on its body, and it would take some time to heal.

Kim Sae-Jin felt a prescence near him. It was warm and peaceful. Like an ocean, but something more.

He found himself, watching the Earth from above the clouds, basking on the grandness of the nature and wonder of the world.

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"Thank You."

Kim Sae-Jin heard it.

No. It more like he felt it.

It was a comfortable feeling like the ocean, but with an intent.

Kim Sae-Jin has an idea what it is, after spending for quite some time on Earth.

And he felt that the wish of the intent was granted through him.

And Kim Sae-Jin knew, that it's his turn.

And a smile formed from his face.

The Dimensional Devourer.

Otherworlders described it as the unstoppable calamity.

With the incredible despair and defeat engraved in their bodies, the otherworlders truly believed that the Earth is a lost cause.

But a miracle occurred.

In their darkest hour, a glimmer of hope appeared. In the form of Bahamut.

Despite being a monster, Bahamut successfully eliminated the Dimensional Devourer.

And the many fissures that opened during the calamity around the world began to close.

With the help of The Monster Guild supplying high-ranked weapons, deployment of Griffins, and the potions from the Goblin Alchemist, the Knights and Wizards across the world successfully defeated the Boss monsters and their legions, and the world escaped the greatest calamity it has ever encountered.

A month after the passing of the great calamity, a religion worshipping Bahamut sprang up. People were disappointed and distrustful towards the pre-existing religions that didn't offer any real, tangible aid during the most obvious apocalyptic threat ever recorded in history – and also, with an uncanny timing, several 'followers' of Bahamut popped up suddenly, too.

The pre-existing religions offered the usual line of excuses, even going as far as to say that their gods had sent Bahamut to humanity and all that, but with the exception of a small percentage, modern humans weren't delusional enough to fall for such empty claims.

Inevitably, after the religion came the organisation, and eventually, the Bahamut organisation's greatest temple of worship was built on the very spot where the Dimensional Devourer was felled. This place became the holy land that many worshippers from all corners of the globe made pilgrimage to.

A religion that became one of the biggest in the world through only a single moment, the Bahamut Church – and the leader of this organisation was Lillia.

And also....

'He' had disappeared.

No one knew where he had vanished to.

Did he run away because he fell in love with another woman, or did he migrate to another world after he got scared by the prospect of the world coming to an end...?

And it seemed like the only person who knew the details was the Bathory woman, but it was difficult to meet with her, and when I somehow found a chance to ask her, she refused to give me a straight answer.

I could only spend the time alone, with no one to blame.

I found out for the first time in my life that prolonged longing could morph into powerful heartache. But, I endured, believing that I would see him sooner or later.

And so.... a year went by, without him by my side.

Finally, the date for the regular gathering of The Monster Guild had arrived. So, I tidied myself up and went there.

'All Guild members must attend the meeting.'

I was so sure that he wouldn't forget the one real rule he came up with for the Guild he created with his own hands.

After all, the gathering was supposed to take place on the 17th of every month, but in his consideration, it had been changed into an annual event, instead.

So, he should show up on this one. He must.

The gathering was scheduled for seven in the evening, and I arrived at 6:30. However, everyone was here already. Kim Yu-Rin unni, the Tower Lord Hazeline, the member of parliament Yu Baek-Song, the married couple Joo Ji-Hyuk and Yi Hye-Rin, Bathory and Rhosrahdel, as well as Kim Sun-Ho and the rest of the newbie members.

Everyone greeted me with welcoming faces.

Yet, only one person was missing.

"You came?" (Kim Yu-Rin)

Yu-Rin unni asked me first. I forced out a smile.

"Yes. Unni, I heard you've been really busy lately? It must've been really difficult to find a gap in your schedule... Thank you for coming today." (Yu Sae-Jung)

As soon as Monsters became existences that needed to be reared for the future rather than to be exterminated on sight, Yu-Rin unni left the world of Knights immediately without any regrets.

And then, she concentrated on the entertainment industry side of things.

She made a success out of three, four variety shows she appeared in as a regular cast member, and her debut as an actress was a roaring success as well.

So, nowadays the name 'Kim Yu-Rin' was better known as a celebrity rather than a former Knight. Understandably so, she was incredibly busy in her life due to all of her entertainment industry commitments.

But, even though she was busy, she found time to continue her work as the 'Orc Enthusiast'. The thing was, many Hero Orcs still existed – they even rescued many ordinary people attempting to run away from the rampaging Monsters, and offered shelter within their village. Which in turn, made them into national treasures of Korean people.

"That's true, but I still wouldn't miss this gathering." (Kim Yu-Rin)

"No wait, Sae-Jung-ah. This unni, she only came here to see whether he's coming or not. You gotta watch out now. This person here, as much as you, she wants to see hi..." (Yi Hye-Rin)

"Uh-muh. What could you possibly be talking about?" (TL: 'uh-muh' = 'oh my, my.') (Kim Yu-Rin)

Yi Hye-Rin added some spice in a playful attempt to get a rise out of her, but now that Kim Yu-Rin had escaped from beneath the weighty burden of being a Knight, and thereby becoming much more relaxed, such a provocation didn't work anymore.

"Hahat... But, you, Hye-Rin unni, I thought you'd be too busy being lovey-dovey for today." (Yu Sae-Jung)

Joo Ji-Hyuk and Yi Hye-Rin must've been the most famous married couple in Korea right now. They were appearing on two TV shows together, and all the sweetness they poured out to each other on screen was something else to behold, really.

"Well, we can still love outside the house, right~?" (Yi Hye-Rin)

While saying something that might lead to a misunderstanding, Yi Hye-Rin leaned her head on Joo Ji-Hyuk's shoulder.

Hazeline looked at the duo with a dissatisfied expression, before lamenting out softly.

"Anyways..... He's not coming again, is he? And I even shoved all that urgent Tower business aside to come here." (Hazeline)

Hazeline was currently reigning over the world's best Wizard Tower as its Lord.

Unlike Knights, magic still played big part in society even after reduction in the Monsters' numbers, so rather than the industry faltering away, it saw many leaps and advances forward, instead.

Well, pretty much every Wizard that was somewhat undecided between sticking to attack magic used to deal with Monsters, and the practical, everyday magic with potential to help the world, finally chose to go with the latter, that was why.

Under these changes, the Dawn & TM's Tower became widely acknowledged as the best in the world.

The thing was, the legacy of Bangbae-Dong Wizard, no, wait, no – most of the 28 grimoires he published before he left had real world applications, it turned out.

And thanks to his enormous accomplishments until the end, the name of the Wizard of Bangbae-Dong, who had vanished without a trace, had become an everlasting legend that may never be repeated again in the Wizarding world.

Bathory did complain slightly during that, though, saying all those magic spells were nothing more than some amateurish rejigging of stuff already existing in her head.

It was then, Yu Baek-Song tugged at Hazeline's robe.

"Hey, help me with my campaign funds." (Yu Baek-Song)

"....Are you insane? Why should I spend money on a cat entering

politics? Besides, you've been elected already, so what gives?" (Hazeline)

"I need lots more later on. You think running a constituency is that simple? At minimum, I gotta be elected three times." (Yu Baek-Song)

"But, isn't there still lots of time left until the election?" (Hazeline)

"I'm specially elected to fill a vacancy, so I gotta get elected again in a year, you know." (Yu Baek-Song)

Surely, the most weird prospect here belonged to Yu Baek-Song. She became a member of parliament. On top of this, her ambitions began ballooning up without anyone noticing it, and now, she could often be 'seen' staring at a certain House with Blue roof tiles with eyes burning with desire.

"Hey, how was the reaction to the interview I shot today?" (Bathory)

To the side, Bathory showed no interest in them whatsoever, and was busy asking her 'retainer' while looking at her phone.

"It's very good, ma'am. Everyone's praising you!" (Rhosrahdel)

"Heu~eung."

At Rhosrahdel's energetic reply, I could hear a slightly happy snort from the side.

It was really tough trying to predict what could've happened to Bathory and Rhosrahdel, during this past year. Well, Bathory had emerged as the clear leader/representative of the union of Vampires, after all.

At first, she alternated between the persona of the Wizard Emil and Bathory the Vampire, but after receiving a perfectly-timed image makeover at the hands of Rhosrahdel, she could appear as Bathory nowadays without an issue – she was even being seen as a

goddess of peace and reconciliation, a moniker people and Vampires alike who knew the truth could never comprehend.

"There hasn't been any incidents lately, Mister Sun-Ho?" (Yu Sae-Jung)

"Ah, well. Besides taking care of the children, nothing much's been going on in my life, miss." (Kim Sun-Ho)

As for Kim Sun-Ho.... he resigned from all of his duties and then, became a father of twins. A son and a daughter, no less.

"Mister Sun-Ho's children are so, so cute you know? Let's go and visit them sometime." (Yi Hye-Rin)

".....Yes."

I smiled relaxedly at Yi Hye-Rin's words.

And so, our unhurried conversations took flight. Waiters brought out wonderful food and expensive alcohol, and the members made sure there was no lull in our conversations.

Topics ranged from newbie members, the road ahead for TM to the succession at the Dawn, etc, etc....

One hour, then two, three, four.... time continued to flow, but no one gave up.

Midnight came, and the day had come to an end.

I guess he won't show up today.

As the members of the guild were starting to go home, suddenly a huge tremor was felt across the room. The occurrence was not localized though, as there was various reports that there are monster outbreaks occurring on the whole korean peninsula.

Immediately, the members of the Monster Guild prepared for combat. But before they could set out, a piece of news from the TV made them rooted on their spot.

"We are live at the mountain regions of Gangwon Province,

reporting on what appeared to be a monster outbreak in the vicinity of the 'Monster Field.' We are witnessing a horde of monsters, marching towards the province. Knights and wizards on standby are currently engaging on the battlefield as we speak."

assistant pointing towards a particular monster

"We have just caught sight of what appears to be the an orc, riding a huge wolf. Wait! It's fighting the horde of monsters! I believe this is the 'hero' orc that..." (reporter)

Everyone couldn't believe what they saw on the news!

He's alive!

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< Alternate Ending > Fin.

Lisa's Afternotes

And that's it. I basically retook almost all the content of the last chapter, and maneuvered the story on how it could have ended.

I didn't bother with the epilogue because it's basically just a story about Kim Sae-Jin who lost his memories. Which leaves a bad aftertaste in the mouth.

I didn't particularly like how it ended where the group basically has to start all over again. Granted, it could be fine if the series still continues, but yeah, the author has ended this already.

Unfortunately, i don't have the experience of glib, so i have a hard time articulating some of the ideas i want to portray. Granted, practice makes perfect.

As for my motivation on why i did this. I think i've read the last 50 chapters in one sitting, resulting in me sleeping very very late (about 2am in the morning), and the ending just sooo leaves a really bittersweet ending that i didn't manage to get proper sleep when i slept, and when i woke up, i'm still bothered by the lackluster ending.

Is it a terrible ending? In my view, not really. In the field of storytelling (which i am not an expert of), i think it is quite hard to pull of a bittersweet ending. And i see the point of it in this story.

I'm just not appreciating it that well.

Since these are not my characters, i am not too familiar on how they speak, or behave. But this is as much as i can do.

This was supposed to be part of the alternate ending, but i stopped it short as it didn't flow well. Anyways, here's the rest of the amateurish continuation of the alternate ending

After the battle, the members of The Monster Guild experienced a heartfelt reunion with their Guild Leader. They finally met Kim Sae-Jin after all these time, especially Yu Sae-Jung. It would seem that all their dreams and plans would be fulfilled but the return of Kim Sae-Jin also brought something.

"Hey. Thanks for meeting me out here." (Sae-Jin)

"What took you so long?!" (Yu Sae-Jung, who is tightly embracing Kim)

"Where have you been?" (Hazeline and the rest of the members)

"I don't really remember much, but after the last battle i headed back to the depths of the sea to heal. But a very warm intent was guiding me to go back here."

"I think something is going to happen in the near future. (Sae-Jin)

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"Т

"Looks like i'm coming out of retirement this time..." (Kim Sun-Ho)

and that's it!

Anyways, this is a spur-of-the-moment thing happening.

Thank you for reading!

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[The author, Jee Gab Song's postscript]

[The translator's take]

[The editor's rant]

Alternate Ending

Lisa's Afternotes